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TRANSFORMATION SCENE

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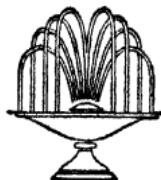
Short Stories

THREE FANTASTIC TALES
THE BEAST
THE MAN WHO COULD STILL LAUGH

TRANSFORMATION SCENE

by

CLAUDE HOUGHTON



COLLINS

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PART I - - MURDER

CHAPTER ONE

THE DREAM

A TERRIBLE DREAM.

So terrible that, when I woke, I was shaking as if I had a rigor. The sheet and blankets had fallen to the floor, and I felt icy cold although I was wet with perspiration.

I sat up in bed, looked round the room, but the minutes passed and I could not believe that the dream was a dream. The familiar furniture, the customary sounds from the street, had an irrelevant quality, whereas every incident in the dream retained overwhelming reality.

Perhaps that was understandable, as I had just wakened, but, after I had dressed, after I had had toast and coffee, and smoked a cigarette in the sitting-room of this Chelsea flat where I have lived for some years, the memory of the dream still obsessed me like an incubus.

I tried every device to exorcise it. I talked aloud. I argued with myself—emphasised that I am recovering from illness ; stressed that I—Max Arnold, an artist—am no stranger to odd experiences, so it was ridiculous, at the age of forty-four, to be unable to banish the memory of a dream—no matter how spectral or how terrifying. I got excited and began to argue with myself more vehemently. But it was no good. I failed. And I failed because I could not convince myself that the dream *was* a dream. . . .

For some unknown reason, I felt uneasy about going to bed last night. I came home at eleven and while I smoked a cigarette before undressing I had the peculiar sensation that there was something which must be done immediately, although I had no idea what it could possibly be. This sensation lasted for a long time after I was in bed and, several times, I felt that I must get up and dress in order to be ready for emergency. At last I put on a dressing-gown, went to the window, and parted the curtains. Fog deepened the gloom of the black-out. London was silent as a moor. I stood motionless for nearly ten minutes, cer-

tain that at any instant I should hear footsteps hurrying towards me.

What made this restlessness more remarkable was the fact that an incident had occurred, when I came in last night, which had irritated me intensely. I found a note in the letter-box from a girl with whom I have been intimate for over four years—a girl called Carol. She is twenty-five and lives in Mitre Street, which runs from the King's Road to the Embankment. I can walk to her flat in a few minutes by taking a short-cut through an alley. But although I have been intimate with Carol for years I know very little about her. Practically nothing! That may sound extraordinary, but the explanation is extremely simple—I have always loathed my physical dependence on her, consequently my visits were intermittent and brief. She must have been aware of this to some extent, for she never made any demands, but always accepted the situation on my terms. I was astonished, therefore, to get a letter asking me to go to her flat—so astonished that I read only the opening sentences, then threw it aside. For the first time, Carol had asked me to do something outside our clearly defined routine and this irritated me, especially as I had begun to hope that I should soon be free of her for ever.

Nothing could indicate the nature of our relations more clearly than the facts that, till yesterday, I had not seen her handwriting—and that I do not remember her surname. I must have known it, of course, but she has been “Carol” for so long that I have forgotten it.

What increased my irritation was the discovery that she has a fine sensitive handwriting and, somehow, that seems utterly incongruous. One way and another, therefore, the whole incident exasperated me and, this being so, it is extraordinary that I soon forgot all about it—and experienced the peculiar sensation that there was something which I *must* do immediately.

That, roughly, was my state last night. I do not think that I slept till about three o'clock. . . .

This was the dream :

I found myself in a dark place of huge dimensions—a place of annihilating size. Deepening silence explored this limitless void. Everything was static : Time had frozen. The débris of a universe surrounded me.

Then a voice whispered :

“ Put on the light, if you’ve had enough of this.”

With a supreme effort of will, I switched on the reading-lamp by the side of the bed.

The familiar room leapt from darkness.

I sat up and listened.

At last I rose and began to dress slowly, but, soon, I had the astral sensation that the real Max Arnold had remained in bed and was watching the preparations of a phantom Max Arnold with ever-increasing perturbation. Eventually, however, I became wholly identified with the man who was dressing with such fastidious care.

I did not know why I had got up, or what I intended to do. I was concerned only with details—the tie I would wear, the rubber-soled shoes, the scarf, the gloves. I evidently attributed great importance to the gloves, because I scrutinised and rejected half a dozen pairs before making a final choice. But I did all this automatically and without conscious knowledge of the objective to which all these details were related.

When I had buttoned a dark overcoat and had adjusted my scarf, I pulled a soft hat firmly over my eyes, then went slowly into the hall and opened the front door. I stood still for over a minute, listening, then hurried down the short flight of stone steps leading to the main entrance.

The massive door was ajar, but this did not surprise me, as the fire-watchers often left it open. I stopped for a moment and looked round. If I had seen someone—if I had heard a sound—I should have returned to my flat. But no one—anywhere. Only silence—everywhere.

I studied my gloves critically, then went out into the double gloom of black-out and fog.

Even when I began to walk towards the alley leading to Carol’s flat, I had no particular destination in mind. Only the activity of the actual moment existed, although I did recognise that any chance incident might end this nocturnal adventure. If I heard footsteps in the alley, which I had just entered—if I heard a voice in an unseen house—I should probably turn back. My will was not involved, for it recognised no goal. I did not know whether I should reach Carol’s flat and, if I did, I had no idea whether I should try to see her. At each moment I auto-

matically obeyed a secret prompting, in much the same way as a hypnotised person responds to orders.

Suddenly, however, as I walked slowly and silently towards the street where Carol lived, I knew that our relations had ended. If I saw her to-night, it would be the last time. I was free! Free of her—and the slavery which she represented. This I knew—and this knowledge was rapture.

When I reached the end of the alley, I again stopped and listened. Nothing to be heard; no one to be seen. I was the only man in London who could have walked confidently to Carol's flat through black-out and fog. Not once did I hesitate. I knew the way to her too well. At last I went on, moving with the certainty of a sleep-walker, *en route* for a familiar destination.

Here was her street. There was the house in a cul-de-sac. I could see neither, but sensed both. I stopped opposite the shop over which Carol lived. I had only to cross the road in order to discover whether her street door was locked. She nearly always left it on the latch, which was extraordinarily stupid, but I was too uninterested to remonstrate with her. If, to-night, it were locked, I should go home. And, as I crossed the road, I was certain that it would not be locked.

The shop had had several owners since the war and was now run by a refugee woman who sold peasant embroidery and attractive odds and ends. She did not live on the premises. Carol's was the only flat over the shop.

I waited before I tried the street door, thinking of the countless times I had come here—and knowing I should never come again. At last I lifted the latch. The door was not locked.

I paused in the passage, then shut the door silently and went up the steep narrow stairs.

She had insisted on giving me a key, although I had no use for it, as I always telephoned before visiting her. Then I forgot all about the key and decided to smoke a cigarette. I lit a match—and saw that the door of the flat was half-open.

Evidently she was not alone, so it would be useless to go in. I could not have said why it would be useless, but I had no doubt about it.

I went nearer.

No sound of voices. Silence! Then I noticed a thin line

of light under the bedroom door. She was awake ! Instantly I realised that I had counted on her being asleep.

I went into the hall.

Several minutes passed.

Suddenly, a clock near me struck four. Each stroke sounded like a shattering explosion. I was certain the whole street would be roused. Then—silence. Silence so profound that I could hear the ticking of my watch.

I went into her bedroom.

The light by the side of the bed, and the one over the dressing-table, were both on. Her clothes hung over the back of a chair. Evidently she had fallen asleep while waiting for someone, because she was lying on the bed in a nightdress and negligée. The book she had been reading had fallen to the floor. A small electric fire was burning.

I stood at the foot of the bed. For the first time, I looked at her without desire. Had she altered, or did sleep transform her ? The chestnut hair was more beautiful than my memories of it : I had forgotten that her eyelashes were so long. Was this the Carol who had fired sexual imagination ? This child ? It was impossible ! And yet, if she woke, would anything exist but her slender seductive body ?

Hatred flamed through me and I turned away.

Then I noticed that, since my last visit, a painting of mine which she had mysteriously acquired had been brought into this room. It was a study of a river scene in Devonshire. Formerly, it had hung in the sitting-room. She had told me that Antony Lawless had given it to her, but I did not know if it were true and had never mentioned the subject to him. Why had she brought it into this room ? It was maddening that she possessed it ! She knew *nothing* about the Max Arnold who had painted it !

While I looked round, it again occurred to me that someone with taste must have advised her about decoration, because the white painted walls and the green furniture transformed the common-place room. Perhaps Lawless had given her some hints. But I did not know, because his relations with her have always been a mystery, especially as I was certain they were not lovers.

Suddenly, I knew why I had come here ! Knew with absolute certainty—without the least shiver of fear. Yes, of course, *that* was why I had come here to-night !

I felt freer now that I knew. I discovered that, unconsciously, I had known for a long time it would end like this. It could only end like this.

I turned and looked at her, in much the same way as a prisoner looks at his cell for the last time.

There was a dagger on the mantelpiece—a relic of a fancy-dress ball, but a real dagger none the less. I had often handled it.

I picked it up, felt the point, then buried it in her heart.

She gave a choking gasp, writhed convulsively—and fell back on the pillow.

It did not occur to me that I was a murderer. She was dead—and I was looking at her. My emotions were not involved. It all seemed nothing to do with me.

I did not hurry to get away. I went to the chair and stared at her clothes. I picked up her vest, her stockings, her dress. Each had an anonymous air. Once, they had been uniquely hers ; now they were anyone's.

I left the room exactly as I had found it ; went slowly down the steep stairs ; then out into the street.

I did not stop to listen, and I did not care whether I met anyone or not. As I walked through the alley, I lit a cigarette. If anything, the fog was thicker. I passed no one and heard nothing.

When I got back to the flat, I had a drink, undressed, and went to bed.

Then a voice, which was Carol's, and not Carol's, whispered :

“ Max ! . . . Max.”

And then I woke. . . .

That was the dream.

CHAPTER TWO

DISCOVERY

THAT WAS the dream—and I re-lived it again in the expectation that it would lose its mesmeric quality, but the effect was the reverse and I eventually decided that it would continue to haunt me so long as I remained alone. in the flat.

I crossed to the window, then looked out.

Even the weather made the grotesque seem the real—fog distorted houses, streets, passers-by. The ghost of the familiar confronted me, not the solid contours of the normal. The sound of the traffic was unsubstantial ; footsteps echoed eerily ; the still-born day had the aspect of a dream.

I went out just before noon and walked rapidly towards Hyde Park Corner. The vigorous movement had a tranquillising effect and before long the everyday world was real enough, despite the shrouding fog. When I reached Hyde Park Corner, visibility had improved and, as I began to walk towards Piccadilly, the terror I had felt on waking seemed far-away and ridiculous. By the time I got to the Ritz, the only survival of the dream was the exhilarating certainty that my relations with Carol had ended.

I bought a midday paper, put it in my pocket, then walked on towards the Circus, having decided to have a drink at a café before lunching at the Oasis.

Owing to illness, I had not been to the Oasis Club for some time. It had been damaged by raids, and the war had swept members far and wide, but it still retained its essential character. It had been founded about fifty years ago and the chief qualification for membership was unorthodoxy or, preferably, originality. The Nomination Committee had consistently applied this somewhat difficult principle of selection, with the result that the Oasis was a unique institution. In one way, the war had enhanced its attraction because there was always a chance that you would run into a friend you had not seen for years. A member had said that the club resembled the next world in this respect. Although I belonged to several clubs, the Oasis was my favourite and I looked forward to lunching there after an absence of many weeks.

The fog was thicker at Piccadilly Circus. You could not see more than a hundred yards. The cosmopolitan throng on the damp pavements had a refugee dejection, while the bewildered expression of several American soldiers showed that they had arrived only recently and were encountering fog for the first time.

I stopped outside the London Pavilion, took the midday paper from my pocket, then glanced at the headlines.

The Russians were near Budapest. The Allies would be

able to use Antwerp in a few days. A quarter of Holland was under water. V 2's falling in Southern England. The war had reached its sixth year. Europe was still writing its epitaph in its own blood.

I glanced at the Stop Press.

CHELSEA STABBING

(SEE FRONT PAGE)

The woman's name is Carol Norton.

I began to tremble so violently that I had difficulty in rereading the sentence.

Norton. Yes, that was the surname, but—but—

Front page ! That's what it said ! Front page !

Early this morning a young woman was found stabbed in a flat at Mitre Street, Chelsea. There was no evidence of robbery and no sign of a struggle. An unusual feature of the case is that the door of the flat was open and the street door unlocked. The police are investigating.

All sorts of grotesque ideas darted into my mind . . . I was still dreaming . . . I was ill, delirious. . . .

Then I remembered the letter I had had from Carol last night.

I fumbled in my overcoat pocket. But I wasn't wearing this coat ! Perhaps I'd put it in my wallet. Yes, of course !

I stared at the handwriting—the fine sensitive handwriting—at the square envelope. Last night, she had written, asking me to go to her flat. Last night, she had been murdered. Last night, I dreamed—

She was dead !

Carol—dead.

Someone ran into me and began to apologise. When he had gone, I looked round. I was outside the Café Royal. I did not remember taking a step since I had stopped outside the London Pavilion to glance at the paper. I must have crossed Shaftesbury Avenue as involuntarily as a sleep-walker.

Sleep-walker.

I dropped the paper and was about to pick it up, when someone took my arm and a familiar voice exclaimed :

“ Max ! ”

I managed to recognise Mervyn Maitland, whom I had not seen since the war.

"Max, my dear fellow ! You look absolutely ghastly. You do, really. Even by modern standards."

I told him I had had influenza and had been stupid enough to stay out late last night.

He took my arm and began to pilot me towards the club.

Although everything about Mervyn Maitland was on a big scale, he did not create an impression of solidity. He was six feet, very broad, with a big head, a resounding voice—and yet seemed to have no more substance than a shadow. He was forty-five and belonged to an old family, each generation of which produced men of considerable distinction, women of remarkable beauty—and one notable misfit. Mervyn was the misfit of his generation and sustained the rôle with verve and versatility.

He knew everyone and had drifted from one occupation to another with mercurial alacrity. He had been a half-commission man on the Stock Exchange ; had launched various business enterprises, every one of which had failed ; he had made a brief appearance on the stage ; had been a journalist ; had stood for Parliament as an independent and lost his deposit—but although his friends found him expensive he remained popular, probably because he had an immense zest for life and described his adventures as if they had happened to someone else.

Fortunately he gave me an opportunity to recover some control, as he chattered all the way to St. James's Street, but at last he interrupted himself in order to ask :

"What have you been doing since the lid blew off?"

I told him that, some months before the war, I had dined with a naval officer who had bought some of my pictures. We had discussed camouflage and, when the war came, he asked if I'd join a camouflage research unit.

"And did you?"

"Yes. And have scarcely been out of London since."

"Change for you—after living abroad and only coming to England for flying visits twice a year. What about your own work?"

"I haven't done any for about three years."

"Well, look here, Max, you'd better knock off something, because your pictures are fetching devilish good prices nowadays—in Ireland of all places. So they're letting *you* waste your time on camouflage ! Just what I'd expect."

As we turned out of St. James's Street, I started to tell him that I could eat nothing, but he interrupted :

"Brandy, sandwich, black coffee. In the library. I've a hell of a lot to tell you, Max. A hell of a lot!"

The library was deserted, two of the windows were blocked out as the result of a bomb, a wooden support disfigured one of the walls, but Mervyn altered the whole atmosphere of the room by behaving as if it were his private apartment. He summoned an ancient waiter, told him what we wanted, then sank into a huge arm-chair by the window.

As ever, his clothes were excellent and his general appearance unaltered, but I noticed that the features had a fixity, which was new, and that the expression of the eyes lacked concentration. The very pale blue eyes, under remarkable bushy brows, regarded nothing in particular but everything in general.

When the waiter returned, Mervyn said :

"Drink the brandy. All of it. You really do look simply frightful."

Directly we were alone, he lit a cigarette, blew out a cloud of smoke which he watched with a mildly surprised air before he said :

"My dear fellow, I've had a time since I saw you last. Must be six years ago. Yes, no end of a time. Absolute *Odyssey*! Simply grotesque! Must tell you about it. I was forty when the Fight for Freedom started. Directly war was declared, wires poured in from my mother saying that now, at last—and thank God for it—I simply *must* do something. So she got me a commission. Ludicrous! Luckily the colonel was a very decent fellow. He felt my position keenly. Anyway, in due course, off we rattled to France with a couple of guns and a few rifles. Finally, we arrived at Dunkirk, very much the worse for wear."

Pause.

"I don't know if it's generally recognised, but Dunkirk was extremely unpleasant. Unless you happen to like soldiering. I don't personally. It's too noisy. However, owing entirely to a sergeant—a most practical fellow—I returned to the Island Home."

He stared at the ceiling for some moments with wide-eyed vacuity, then went on :

"I had to go before a board. They said I was in bad shape. That was the phrase—in bad shape. They thought a trip would do me good. At least old Huggins did. You remember him—did awfully well in the Crimea. Anyway, the board decided that I must have a trip, and told me to take charge of some German prisoners who were being sent to Canada. So I found myself in a ship with hundreds of the *Herrenvolk*."

Pause.

"Extraordinary people ! I speak German, as my mother brought me up with a succession of foreign governesses—with the result that I started to learn English at the age of sixteen. Yes, I chatted to the Master Race. Absurd people, really. Still, excellent relations between officers and men, perfect discipline and, much more important, remarkably clean. I discussed tactics with one German officer who seemed dumbfounded by my ideas. God knows why ! They were all Hitler-hypnotised, of course, and I found that rather tiresome."

Another pause.

"Well, I had a look at Canada, then embarked for the return journey—and was promptly torpedoed. I spent an indefinite period bouncing about on a raft, clad in a shirt—and was duly rescued by a British destroyer. Young Harry Boulter was in command. He was in absolute fits when he saw me being hauled off the raft by an intricate contrivance and in a somewhat indecent attitude. You know Harry Boulter. I was up at Oxford with his brother. He married the Garnsey girl—the one with the warts. Anyhow, they looked after me very well in the destroyer. I drank buckets of rum and pails of cocoa. Harry insisted on hearing my military adventures, so I related a few of them while he rolled about with laughter. God knows why ! Eventually, looking like the end of the war, I reached the Island Fortress."

He took a sip of brandy, then went on :

"Well, I had to go before another board. Old Huggins wasn't on it and they decided that I was fighting fit. They evidently liked the phrase, because they said it three times. So I went back to the army—and found the most extraordinary state of affairs. The captain in my show was an ex-policeman. I didn't mind, personally, because I like

the lower classes, but it did seem rather odd, don't you know? The colonel was a pawnbroker, when he was in 'Civvy Street,' as he expressed it, and the major was a potato merchant. All frightfully efficient. I tell you, I found it rather strenuous. Then some general came to review something or other—I could never quite make out what—and I ought to have done something and didn't do it. There was a most complicated inquiry, which they made me attend for some obscure reason—and the upshot of the whole thing was that they invalidated me out of the army."

He finished the brandy, then rose and rang the bell. When the waiter appeared, Mervyn ordered more brandy, was told he could not have it, so he demanded gin—and the afternoon paper.

"I became a civilian again, Max. I went to live with Hughie Downs in Clarges Street—and then came the London blitz. Every night I was blown to a different district. Air-raid wardens became so used to seeing me hurtling through the air that they made no comment. Eventually, I was rather ill, so I went to the country for a long time. Then I returned to London. I arrived with the first flying bomb."

The waiter appeared with the drinks and the newspaper. A long silence followed his departure and, so far as I was concerned, it would have continued indefinitely, because I felt too ill to say a word. Nevertheless, I did vaguely realise that Mervyn had altered, for although he had always described his adventures with the detachment of a spectator, he now did this consciously—as if he recognised that it was essential to keep at a distance experiences which had disrupted him more than he dared to admit.

"D'you know," he exclaimed, "that my mother writes every other day saying how ashamed she is that I am not racing after Germans, sword in hand? My young brother in the Buffs has just got the D.S.O. and that made her more virulent than ever."

He produced a heavily-crested envelope, took out a letter and read :

My dear Mervyn,

How you can continue to loll about, I really CANNOT IMAGINE.

"She's printed the last two words. There's pages of it. Loll about? Why, my dear Max, my whole wretched existence is one desperate search for food. All day I rush from shop to shop, and restaurant to restaurant. All night I dream of pilchards. At the minute, I'm living with Cyril Cator. You know Cyril."

I said I did not know Cyril.

"Surely! Married General Bentley's daughter. You must know Cator—interior decorator before the war, then became a Lieut.-Colonel and was put in charge of blitzed laundries. Don't know what he does now and he isn't very clear about it. He has a slum-flat near Bloomsbury. We have a char, who turns up at regular but hugely-separated intervals, like a comet, so we never get any breakfast."

He lit a cigarette, then went on :

"It got desperate about breakfast. Then Cyril noticed that lorry drivers always look pretty plump, so I shadowed one to a sinister haunt where they eat. Cyril and I went there for weeks. The lorry drivers did not seem to mind. So we all munch breakfast together, looking like a pre-view of the New Order."

He sipped his gin, looked round vacantly, then announced :

"I shall clear out, Max, when the war's over. I shall go to South America. Why not? I haven't any ties."

"No ties?"

"Not nowadays. My eldest daughter is in the Wrens and wants to stay in them after the war—so that's the end of her. One daughter is married, and Drina is about sixteen—so she'll become one of Mr. Bevin's Young Ladies. Family life's finished. Of course, there's my wife."

"What does she think about your going to South America?"

"Ella's no time to think. She's in Reading or somewhere. She runs a canteen—fire-watches every night—organises Savings Weeks—and I don't know what. Well, I had something rather important to tell her, so I went to see her a few days ago."

He finished his gin, looked round the library as if he were mildly surprised to find himself still in it, then went on :

"I went to see Ella about a girl called Jess. She's about twenty-five and a secretary or something. We were munch-

ing macaroni in a restaurant and I spoke to her. Soon, we became lovers. You know how it is. Well, when that had been going on for about three months, I thought I'd better tell my wife. So off I go to see Ella."

He sighed deeply, then continued :

"I'd forgotten that Ella never has a second's leisure. When I arrived, she was serving tea in the canteen—tea and buns—to an endless queue. I said : 'Look here, Ella, you've been broadminded in the past, but—' Then someone asked for a doughnut instead of a bun. Chaos. When we got back to the house I said : 'Look here, Ella, I've met a girl called Jess but—' Then an air-raid warden rushed in and asked if Burdock Square was in their district. Pandemonium ! Maps produced ! Arguments ! When he went, I said : 'Look here, Ella, it's rather serious this time but—' Then the telephone bell rang and an incomprehensible conversation took place about the pay of fire-watchers. When that was over, I said : 'Look here, you're the mother of my children—' Then the Alert went. So I gave up. I put on my hat, and walked to the station through fountains of falling flak."

A long pause.

"It's rather a bore, but I'll have to leave Cyril because his wife is coming back. She disappeared the day war was declared—worked as a diver or something—and Cyril heard nothing from her for years. Now she's coming back. Naturally, he's not alone. He started a Second Front long ago, so things will be complicated. I shall clear out."

"Where will you go ? "

"I think I'll go to Jess. She has a floor in a house at St. John's Wood. Shares it with a girl called Frieda, who is a government typist, and is crazy on an Italian prisoner of war. She met him when she went harvesting on her holidays and is mad-keen on him. It's unconditional surrender—in reverse. But that's by the way. I think I'll go to Jess. She has a spare room—very spare—but it will do."

He picked up the newspaper, glanced at it, then said :

"Budapest threatened. You know, Max, a year hence, everything in this paper will seem worlds away. I'll tell you what I mean. Last night, a fellow mentioned the Battle of the River Plate. My mind side-slipped. The Battle of the

River Plate? When was that? This war? Last war? It took quite a time to remember."

He turned the paper over and, a minute later, gave a long low whistle.

"Listen to *this*. There was a murder last night. Girl of twenty-five—artist's model—stabbed in Chelsea. Doors left open. No struggle. No robbery. Got that? I was a journalist once and I'll bet you this will be a sensation. Twenty-five—artist's model—mystery! It's got everything. It will push the war off the front page of the picture papers."

I said nothing, so he glanced at me.

"I say, Max, I don't want to emphasise it, but you do really look absolutely *ghastly*."

"I don't feel good. I'd better go home. D'you think the porter could get a taxi?"

"Of course not! He's deaf—and the boy who helps him is dumb. That's why the club can keep 'em. I'll get a taxi. It will take me, roughly, about an hour and a half."

Some ten minutes later, he returned triumphant.

"Marvellous luck! Spotted a taxi with nine American soldiers getting out of it. Now, before you go, what's your address?"

I gave him a card, then, as we went downstairs, he said:

"Grand meeting you, Max, and hearing all your news."

Then he added: "I'm right about that murder. I got a later paper. Banner headline: THE CHELSEA MURDER. By the way, that artist's model lived at Mitre Street. That's near you, isn't it?"

"Quite near."

When we reached the pavement, he said:

"Let's meet soon. And don't waste any more time on camouflage. Still, it's a miracle they didn't send you to the mines. I expect to be directed to them soon. So you'd better get some coal in."

CHAPTER THREE

RETROSPECT

I REMEMBER little of the drive to Chelsea, except that the fog became thicker as we approached the river and we had difficulty in finding our destination. Directly I reached the sitting-room, I collapsed on to a sofa and stayed there until I eventually discovered that it was very cold—that the room was indistinguishable from the fog outside—that a radio had been switched on in the flat above.

I rose with difficulty, drew the curtains, turned on the light, then looked round the room which contained nothing that belonged to me. The solid self-satisfied furniture, the solitary etching, the military text-books on the shelves, the encyclopædia in its revolving case were Major Black's—and all regarded me with resentment. I was an interloper. The war had prisoned me in this flat and, until it ended, here I should remain.

An idea occurred to me and I went into the bedroom, opened the wardrobe and took out the things I had worn in my dream. Perhaps one or other of them would reveal whether I had been *out* in them last night. I studied in turn the overcoat, scarf, gloves, rubber-soled shoes, but, gradually, the horrible delusion possessed me that I was about to re-enact the dream down to its least detail. Again, I felt like an automaton until, at last, I threw the things aside and returned to the sitting-room.

But there was no evading the facts which confronted me like spectres : Carol had been stabbed ; the door of her flat was open ; the street door unlocked ; no struggle ; no robbery. In my dream, all this had been so. In actuality, it had been so. There was only one explanation—one which made me tremble.

I had not dreamed last night. I had walked in my sleep to Carol's flat.

Do you think I don't know that any other man would have instantly dismissed that explanation as fantasy ? Of course I know it ! Whatever the facts were, he would reject

that explanation of them. But, *for me*, it is impossible to reject it.

It is impossible because, as a child, I walked in my sleep, again and again. And in a manner wholly similar to the one in which I went to Carol's flat in my "dream."

2

I must go back to my childhood. I must relive experiences which determined my destiny, as surely as the mould into which molten metal is poured fashions its final shape.

I must go back, and it is difficult to go back. Difficult because, for people over forty, memory is not a road to retrace. It is a hotchpot of the lives one has lived : childhood ; the world before 1914 ; the first great war ; the years between the wars ; 1939 onwards. These lives have no organic sequence, so there are gaps in memory : misty abysses from which emerge faces forgotten and scenes obliterated—the débris of days, near in time, but, spiritually, far away and long ago. . . .

My parents were unhappy people, though it was not until I went to boarding-school, when I was twelve, that I began to discover the extent and enigmatic nature of their unhappiness. Many things, delightful to me as a child, acquired new emphasis when I reviewed them as a man. The continual travelling all over Europe till I was seven—my parents' sudden decisions to go here, there, anywhere—their febrile enthusiasms—their childish belief that, henceforth, everything would be entirely different—all became remarkably revealing in retrospect.

The most moving fact about them was their devotion to each other. This devotion—unlike any I have encountered since—was so profound that it isolated them, because others instinctively recognised that here were two beings as mutually dependent, and as remote from humanity, as two lovers marooned on a deserted island. I never knew them spend one day apart and it was not fortuitous that my mother died within a month of my father's death.

There are people who seem to have come to this world by mistake ; people who, no matter how strenuously they struggle to adjust themselves to ordinary existence, remain

strangers to it. These are they who, in varying degrees, are "tenants to tragedy"—and encounter it as infallibly as Lear.

Of the two, my father was the more mysterious because his isolation could not be attributed to an external cause, whereas my mother's was the result of frustrated ambition. She had made a sensational début on the operatic stage—she had beauty—consequently a brilliant career seemed certain, when she became a semi-invalid almost overnight.

Perhaps the most revealing fact about my father, which I learned after his death, is that he asked my mother to marry him immediately after the collapse of her hopes and at the precise moment when others were diplomatically deserting her. This would be understandable if he had been an infatuated well-to-do nonentity, but, actually, he was extraordinarily gifted and could have succeeded in half a dozen different careers, had it not been for the fact that all his gifts were on the circumference of his nature, not at the centre, consequently they lacked vital stimulus. He was a man permanently in search of something which he never found.

There are people about whom a final decision is never reached, and my father was one of them. Sometimes I think he had the temperament of a martyr—a martyr without a creed. Sometimes he seems an artist with every gift, except concentration. And sometimes I am convinced that he and my mother were just a couple of hyper-sensitive nerve-tortured people who ought never to have married—and certainly should not have had a child.

But these retrospective theories become shadowy on the background of the passionate affection which my parents evoked when I was a boy. Our wanderings through Europe were endless enchantment, and even now, city after city, scene after scene, rise before me dowered with that enchantment, until I am overwhelmed with gratitude for memories so magical that they seem half-dream, half-vision.

But I have memories other than these—memories of incidents which hold a content far greater than their setting. . . . An autumn afternoon in Rome. My mother was standing at a window, unaware that I had come in and now stood near the half-open door. Again I see the bewilderment of her expression, the listless droop of the white hands, the

luminous black hair, the dark eyes—the resignation shrouding the lonely figure. Again I feel the affection which glowed in me then—the sensation of something rare, remote, mysterious.

. . . A cloudy morning in Florence. We were leaving. The luggage had gone : my mother and I were downstairs, waiting to go to the station. At last she asked me to find out what my father was doing. I ran up the stairs, but stopped when I reached the wide-open door of the sitting-room. He stood, looking in turn at the writing-table, chairs, walls, carpet, as if realising that these had shared a part of his life and that he would never see them again. He gazed, not at a room, but at mystery—the mystery implicit in the simplest events. He seemed to be listening : the clock on the mantelpiece ticked feverishly. I looked at the slender figure ; the thick auburn hair ; the oval face ; the unquiet eyes—the sensitive hands. The silence was part of him. And I had the disturbing sensation that we had not met before—that, when he turned, he would not recognise me. . . .

But the debt of debts which I owe to my father is that he taught me to *see*. My gift for drawing developed very early—I could draw before I could read—and he fostered this gift with knowledge and imagination. Oddly enough, in view of his inner preoccupations, he belonged to those for whom the visible world exists and, to be with him, was to find the familiar transfigured. Everything suddenly revealed the marvel of its exclusive being, and its mysterious relation to the whole. Simply by his presence, he compelled recognition of the fact that every single moment is a uniquely-occurring, never-returning miracle. I remember a morning with him in a little Italian town, and the swift realisation that once, once only, would this Southern sunlit street present *this* aspect—that fleet of gossamer clouds ; those shadows ; that girl at that window ; those picturesque loiterers. Once, once only ! And, paradoxically, this realisation of the ephemeral revealed the eternal quality of that Southern sunlit street. . . .

When I was six, we went to London and, on our return to Vienna, my mother brought an English maid with her. Hilda was eighteen, flaxen-haired, blue-eyed, and as English in temperament as she was in appearance. She had never been to the Continent before, but she remained unimpressed. Her attitude implied that, presumably, these

strange cities and these queer foreigners were necessary, although she could not imagine why. Nevertheless, my mother became very attached to her and I believe it was Hilda's unconsciously exerted influence which caused a total change in our way of life.

Hilda came from Kent and never ceased contrasting its glories with "these foreign places where you don't know who you're rubbing shoulders with." But, whether or not Hilda was responsible, before she had been with us for a year, my father bought a house in one of the loveliest parts of Kent—and our travelling days were done.

3

Soon after the coming of Hilda, I made the bewildering discovery that my parents were different from other people and that their way of living was "queer." I also made the much more bewildering discovery that Hilda had never met any one like me "in all her born days" and that I was "a rum 'un and no mistake."

These assertions were not conscious criticism. Hilda suddenly found herself in a strange world with strange people and, being an impulsive nature, she gave emphatic expression to her astonishment.

One day in Budapest, a few weeks before my father bought the house in Kent, I asked :

"How do other people live, Hilda?"

"Well, they stay at home for one thing. They live in the same place, year after year. Lots of 'em are born and die in the same house."

"I was born in Paris."

"Paris."

There was such frosty contempt in her tone that some moments passed before I ventured to ask :

"Where were you born?"

"Sevenoaks."

"Where's that?"

"Kent, of course!"

I stared at the flaxen hair, at the blue eyes, at the rounded figure—and wondered what it felt like to have been born in Kent.

Suddenly she exclaimed :

“ No wonder you’re nervy ! ”

“ Nervy ? What’s that ? ”

“ Jumping about like a flea.”

I tried to summon memories of jumping fleas, without much success, then asserted that I was not nervy—only because I didn’t like the sound of the word.

“ Not nervy ? You ! Why, you’re all on wires.”

I was about to verify this exciting statement, by looking under the seat on which we were sitting, when Hilda went on :

“ Any one with half an eye could see that you’re nervy. Just look at you—with your coal-black hair, great grey eyes, and tiny hands and feet ! Besides, you talk in your sleep.”

That was marvellous news ! So, when you were asleep, you met people and talked to them. Who were they ? Why didn’t you remember them ? Perhaps they were people you were going to meet. Or, perhaps, they were people who had died. Perhaps I talked to the lady we had met in that hotel at Munich—the lady who died so suddenly.

Then Hilda added :

“ And you *walk* in your sleep ! ”

“ Walk—in my sleep ? ”

“ Yes.”

“ Where do I go ? ”

“ You came into my room once. In you came, and woke me up. Did I jump ! ‘ What d’you want ? ’ I said. Not a word ! You were looking for something. All round the room you went, never banging into anything, till you found my bag. Then you took the marble I had taken away from you—and out you go.”

Almost immediately, she went on :

“ Up I jump and follow you. Back you go to your room, take off your dressing-gown, hang it up, and get into bed. Never see anything like it in all my born days ! ”

I remembered dreaming that I had gone to Hilda’s room. And I also remembered my joy, the next morning, on finding the missing marble with the others. It was a big glass marble, with a core of crescent-shaped colours : green and blue and white. If you looked at them long enough, something went out of you—and returned enriched.

Then Hilda exclaimed :

“ But that’s not all ! Fancy being able to draw like you can ! It isn’t natural.”

“ What do you mean by natural ? ”

“ Everything that’s right and proper.”

Pause.

“ Most boys of your age like killing rats.”

I thought about that for some time, but eventually decided that I did not want to kill rats.

At last I said :

“ I’ve got something for you.”

“ No ! What is it ? ”

I opened a portfolio which was on my lap and took out a drawing. A day or two ago, I had been in my mother’s room, watching Hilda sort the linen. Suddenly I saw her as I had never seen her before, and there and then, had done a drawing of her.

I handed it to Hilda.

She stared at it, round-eyed, for nearly a minute.

“ You did this ? ”

“ Yes.”

“ On your own ? ”

“ Yes.”

“ By hand ? ”

“ Yes.”

“ Lor ! ”

She gazed at me as if I were an apparition.

“ Can I send this to my mother ? I’ll let you have it back.”

“ I don’t want it back. You can have it.”

She pressed my hand.

“ You’re awfully nice.”

“ So are you.”

“ Although you *are* queer.”

“ I’m not queer.”

“ Yes, you are. Look at the things you do. Sit for hours, watching the sunlight on a tree—or staring at shadows.”

“ There’s nothing so wonderful as light, Hilda. It’s never the same. It changes everything—every minute. There’s no good just looking at something and thinking you’d like to draw it. You’ve got to *see* it—in a flash.”

“ Did you see me in a flash, when I was sorting that linen ? ”

"Yes. I saw you as you were at that second—as you always will be—as you'll never be again. My father says that unless you see people and things like that, you don't *see* them."

"No wonder your mother says you're going to be an artist."

"I am an artist."

"You know what I mean. It's going to be your job—like my father drives a railway engine."

"Does he drive an engine?"

"Yes—the night mail."

The night mail! When I was in bed and asleep, her father was thundering along on the night mail! I could see him and the stoker, luridly lit by the orange glare from the furnace; shadows leaping round and over them. I could see the flame-shot flying smoke: the twin shafts of jagged light, jutting out into darkness—snatching a post, a tree, or a hut from obscurity; abandoning it to oblivion. The night mail, hurtling endlessly on, wakening stations with a roar, startling cattle in sleepy meadows!

After we moved to Kent, I saw less of Hilda because my mother became so attached to her that she ceased to be a maid and became a companion. But although I liked Hilda, there was so much to explore near our new home that I was happy enough alone.

We moved to Kent in the spring of 1907 and, for the first time, I saw the English countryside shyly awake to loveliness. Never had I seen such beauty—beauty that is benediction: beauty that puts God's hand upon your heart. The English country in early May! A whispered invitation to share a miracle: a tremulous glory—kindling the living; hallowed by the love of the dead.

Our home was an old rather rambling house, obscured by trees, set back from a road that was little more than a lane. Branches met over the drive which, in summer, was dim as a cathedral aisle. A stream divided the terraced garden from a sloping orchard but—from a well-loved perch on the roof of the stables—I could see heavenly meadows and the dazzling gleam of a distant sunlit chalk-pit.

No other house was visible. Very rarely, you heard the far-away rattle of a lazy cart, but, usually, only the busy hum of a sunny day—until shadows claimed garden, orchard, stream.

The nearest town, which had the atmosphere of a village,

was five miles away and the winding road leading to it passed widely separated houses, mellowing in the sunshine, then threaded the twilight of a wood, to emerge in the open blossoming countryside. Occasionally you met a carriage, or a slow-moving wagon piled high with hay, or a cluster of complaining sheep, but, usually, the white dusty road was deserted and the only sounds were the songs of darting birds, the pebbly tinkle of a stream, the melodious moving of summer boughs.

And then—the town ! Miniature, bow-windowed shops ; the market square ; the old inn, whose open doors yawned content and hospitality. The smell of the wine-shop—with its sanded floor, its immense barrel in a corner and, on the counter, a little model of a wain yoked with oxen ! And then—the ebon shadows on a white street ; the impatient stamp of a horse tied to a post ; red-faced farmers ; loungers outside the public house ! At the lower end, the road dipped between hop-fields but, at the top of the town, it branched sharply to the left and led to a vast view of the Weald of Kent, outstretched below, like paradise regained.

The walk to the town, and the town itself, held so many delights and discoveries that several weeks passed before I explored the road which ran in the opposite direction—the road that was little more than a lane.

The road in which I found the Empty House.

4

I remember every detail of the May morning on which I saw the Empty House for the first time. A languorous morning with static clouds in a celestial sky—flickering shadows—and drowsy silence, heralding heat.

When I reached the end of our drive, I turned to the left and walked down a narrow road which twisted so often that I could seldom see more than fifty yards ahead. For some little distance, domed chestnut trees created green obscurity, but this avenue ended abruptly and I emerged to find a small circular space on rising ground. Early sunshine flickered in blossoming orchards ; kindled tremulous laburnum ; flashed in dewy lilac. Gala hawthorns wooed the air : singing larks rose rapturously.

When I walked on, I found that the road dipped suddenly down into the twilight of interlacing trees, but, soon, I rounded a sudden bend—and there was the Empty House.

I stopped dead and stared at it.

No one could have lived there for years. The gates were rusty; the short drive was a chaos of nettles; tangled ivy half-hid an old two-storied house.

Several minutes passed, but I did not move. Here was desolation. The air seemed autumnal. This tragic house with its long-closed green shutters confronted the loveliness of spring with an eyeless stare. It had no part in the carnival of May. It remained remote, shrouded, sinister.

I tiptoed to the rusty gates, then peered at the rank garden—at a ruined sun-dial—at the tentacled creeper hiding the front door.

Who had lived here? Who had flung open those shutters to greet the day? Who had leaned over that sun-dial—picked flowers in the garden—stood in that lovely porch? Why had they gone? Where had they gone? Why had the place remained empty?

Affection for this abandoned house began to glow in me. Its desolation seemed more beautiful than the blatant beauty of spring. This old house with its mask-like shutters claimed me, and I knew that never—never—would I forget it. That, in the strangest way imaginable, I had not suddenly found it. I had returned to it.

I do not know how long I stood by those rusty gates, wondering when the last footfall had echoed in this place long sealed by silence, but, eventually, such passionate curiosity consumed me that I turned and hurried home, unaware of blossoming boughs and lyric birds, intent only to discover the history of those who had once lived in the Empty House.

I knew it would be useless to ask my parents, as we had come to Kent so recently, but Hilda had been born there. She would be able to tell me all I wanted to know.

I found her in the stables, playing with a puppy which I loved to distraction, but, now, I ignored it and poured out an almost incoherent account of my adventures, followed by a series of breathless questions.

“Who lived there, Hilda? What were they like? Why

did they leave? When did they go? D'you think they'll come back one day?"

She stared at me with wide-open blue eyes.

"What on earth do you want to know all that for?"

"Because I do. I love that old house. I love the people who lived there."

"Love them! How can you love them when you've never seen 'em? You *are* a rum 'un and that's a fact! If it's not one thing, it's another."

"But who *were* they?"

"How should I know? That house has been empty since before you were born. D'you think I've nothing better to do than run about trying to find out who used to live in all the empty houses?"

"But *why* is it empty? There isn't another empty house for miles round."

"Because it's damp. You know how the road runs down to it. And there's a big wood at the back. The whole place gives me the creeps. But *you*—like it!"

"I love it. And I love the people who used to live there. I believe they'll come back. I can imagine the house when they *were* there—when the shutters were open and there were flowers in the garden and the sun-dial wasn't broken. They must have been awfully nice people. They were happy in that house. I'm certain they were happy. Perhaps it's good that no one else went to live there. Perhaps the house wouldn't have liked it."

"D'you know what's the matter with you?"

"No. What?"

"You imagine too much. Never known anything like it! The things you think of! All afire with excitement just because you've seen an empty house!"

"I'm going to find out everything about it."

She looked at me with a strange expression, then exclaimed :

"Don't you do that! If you ask any one about it, they'll only tell you a lot of lies."

"Why?"

"Because that's what they do in these parts to boys who ask too many questions. Besides, they'll have forgotten. Who cares about an empty house?"

"I do. I'll never forget that house. Never!"

But Hilda was evidently determined to end the conversation, because she exclaimed :

“ Bet I race you to the house ! ”

“ Bet you won’t ! ”

A few days after this conversation, a remarkable event occurred and one which remained a mystery for many months : my father had a bed moved into my room and slept there every night. When I asked why, he said that he liked the view from the window—an explanation which I accepted as entirely adequate, especially as this new arrangement gave me great satisfaction. Sometimes he would read to me for an hour or two. He would fetch a book from his study—that study which housed many occult works, as I discovered years later—then he would read to me in a voice that a great actor might have envied. Sometimes he would stop to explain *his* understanding of what he had just read.

I sat up in bed, wide-eyed, enthralled.

5

I could think only of the Empty House.

I accepted Hilda’s statement that it would be useless to question others, so my imagination was free to create drama after drama about the people who used to live in the Empty House—and theory after theory to explain the mystery of its desolation.

At all hours of the day, I stood by the rusty gates until every nettle, every strand of dangling creeper, every shuttered window, every cluster of ivy became familiar. But whether I stood by the gates when dawn whitened the sky, or when shadowless noon held everything in thrall, or when twilight slowly obliterated contours and colours, the essential atmosphere of the tragic house did not change. Rain might rattle on shutters, winds roar through the woods, lightning might flicker and thunder roll, but the Empty House remained as remote from these vicissitudes as the dead in their graves.

Familiarity, however, did not deliver me from fear and, no matter how often I stood by the gates, nothing could have compelled me to open them and walk up the derelict drive. Even to imagine standing in the porch, confronted by that

tentacled creeper, so terrified me that I could think of nothing demanding greater courage.

Then something new happened.

I began to *imagine* the people who had lived there. At first they were shadowy, background figures, but, finally, they seemed as real as Hilda. The family which eventually emerged in my imagination consisted of a father and mother ; a boy, Maurice ; and a girl—Fredrika.

I could see them ! I could hear them ! They were happy in a way I had never known and they inspired passionate longing for such happiness. The more real they became, the more frequently I had visions of the Empty House as it had been when they lived in it.

It rose from desolation like a dream.

The rust had gone from the gates and the nettles from the drive. Flowers lit the spacious garden : birds sang in the snowy orchard. The green shutters were flung back—a blue front door stood invitingly open—laughter and eager voices filled the old white house glowing in sunshine. It had risen from the dead, and I gazed at it enthralled.

Then something very strange happened. Maurice, Fredrika, and their parents ceased to be people whom I had invented and who had once lived in the Empty House.

They were living there now.

Yes—now ! I lavished imagination upon them until Fredrika and Maurice seemed my constant companions. They roamed the countryside with me, shared all my hopes, collaborated in all my schemes. They became so intimate that I planned nothing in which they had no part.

They existed only in my imagination—but they were wholly real to me.

Not very remarkable, when one remembers the extent to which the element of “make-believe” enters into a child’s life—and certainly not remarkable in my case, as I had no companions of my own age. Actually, with the exception of my tutor, I seldom saw any one except my parents and Hilda—and, recently, Hilda’s time was almost wholly occupied attending to my mother, who had become practically a permanent invalid, so it was not unusual for me to spend hours and hours alone. It is not surprising, therefore, that my imaginary companions became more and more real.

Even now, the images of Fredrika and Maurice are more vital in my memory than those of many flesh and blood acquaintances, encountered long ago and half-forgotten long ago. Fredrika and Maurice are immortal. Imagination created them, and they are therefore invulnerable to the siege of time and the vicissitudes of chance. They inhabit realms remote from humanity. No hungry generations tread them down.

Even now, I can see Maurice with his fearless freckled face and brown solemn eyes. I can see slender Fredrika with dark curly hair, lit brows, and elfin features. I can see her eager impulsive movements, her impetuous mouth, her imaginative eyes. I can hear her voice, her laugh. I cannot believe that only imagination created her. Surely, surely, she lived long ago—and died long ago!

Often, while I was in bed, waiting for father to come to my room, I reviewed the day's adventures with Fredrika and Maurice. Perhaps, after birds'-nesting, we had had a picnic in a mossy space, under a giant oak, circled by fronds of delicate ferns. While we feasted, we looked at the eggs in Maurice's hat—pale green eggs with ink-black spots.

Or Fredrika and I had wandered into a wooded valley through which a lazy river runs. An enchanted valley. Mid-stream, is a diamond-shaped island, where the river divides in order to double its beauty.

Or we had lit a bonfire at the end of a veiled autumn day—and cooked potatoes in the ashes. Sometimes a charred twig flickered into flame. Nothing moved, except spying shadows.

Or we had been to our dancing class at the Royal Hotel—Miss Pippitt's dancing class, every Friday evening, during the winter. When we left, twilight transformed everything: lights glowed in miniature shops; passers-by had a phantom air. Before leaving the hotel, we had been told to muffle up well because we were warm after dancing. Then we went to a dairy where we each had a glass of milk and a sponge cake.

Or we had had tea with Frederika's parents in the library at the back of the Empty House. I had imagined a finely panelled room so often that I could breathe its mellow atmosphere. All day, rain had rattled like shot on the panes and sudden gusts of wind moaned through leafless boughs

but, just before five o'clock, the rain ceased and the wind dropped. Everything was supernaturally still. Thick white mist made the garden ghostly : the orchard seemed to have turned to smoke. But, in the library, with shutters closed and curtains drawn and a great log fire of leaping flame, everything was enchantment. The eyes of portraits on the walls watched you when you took more honey. Fredrika's father toasted the crumpets and burned two of them, which he insisted on eating himself, provided he could drown them in butter.

How happy these people were—these people who existed *only in my imagination*.

Then an event happened which explained why my father had had a bed moved into my room and had slept there every night for months.

6

Actually, the event occurred soon after my father ceased to share my room. He gave no reason for reverting to the former arrangement but, although I missed him at first, I was so obsessed by Fredrika that everything else seemed secondary.

One October night I went to bed later than usual and had difficulty in going to sleep. But at last I slept—and dreamed that it was a fine May morning and that Fredrika and Maurice were waiting for me to go into town and eat ices. So, in my dream, I hurried through the avenue of domed chestnuts, emerged on to the circular space, then descended into the twilight of interlacing trees, rounded the sudden bend—and there was the Empty House, with shutters open and Fredrika waving from one window and Maurice from another.

Then something amazing happened.

I woke up. It was night. I was fully dressed. *I was standing by the rusty gates.*

The discovery that I had walked in my sleep did not frighten me, but I was appalled by the contrast between dream and reality. Never had the Empty House been so sinister as on this autumn night, under a moon bewitched by flying clouds.

At last I turned and walked slowly home. When I reached the drive, I found my father in a state of great anxiety. He hurried me into the house, gave me a hot drink, and spent the rest of the night in my room.

The next day, he took me to the town to consult Dr. Gandy.

I had a great affection for Dr. Gandy who had often attended me. He was about fifty-five and had calm patient features and steady kind eyes. Directly you saw him, you felt different. Knowing my affection for the doctor, my father decided that I should have a preliminary talk with him, so I went into the consulting-room and, directly I saw Dr. Gandy, I knew that everything was all right and always would be all right.

We talked about various things and then he told me that, several months ago, my father had discovered that I sometimes walked in my sleep and that was why he had had a bed moved into my room. Dr. Gandy instantly added that there was no need for alarm because sleep-walkers, like the blind, have a sense of obstacles but, all the same, it was just as well to stay in your bed once you were in it. He then said that, when we lived abroad, I had sometimes walked in my sleep from one room to another, but, recently, I left the house. For instance, on one occasion, after I had got up and dressed, my father had followed me to the stables, where I patted a puppy of which I was very fond.

I told the doctor that I remembered *dreaming* that I had got up in the night and gone to the stables to pat the puppy. Remembered it quite well.

Then he said we must not forget that I had been much better lately—so much better, in fact, that my father gave up sleeping in my room—but he would like to know whether, last night, I had dreamed that I had gone to the Empty House. I told him that I had but, in my dream, the sun was shining and Fredrika was waving from one window and Maurice from another.

Then he asked who Fredrika and Maurice were, so I plunged into a long account of them and their parents, and told him how much I loved them, and how happy they were, and how lovely the house was—particularly the library where we all had tea together when it was wet.

I was about to continue this breathless account of my

adventures with Fredrika and Maurice when I discovered that he was looking at me with a very peculiar expression.

"You won't tell any one!" I exclaimed. "No one knows about Fredrika and Maurice."

"I won't tell any one," he said in his deep measured voice, "but I would like you to tell me this: has any one talked to you about that old house, and the people who used to live there?"

"Oh no, no one! Hilda told me it was no good asking about the people who used to live there because I'd only be told a lot of lies if I did."

"You like Hilda?"

"Yes, awfully."

He looked at me for a long time before he said:

"Hilda told you nothing whatever about the people who used to live in that empty house?"

"No, nothing. I don't think she knows anything."

"So you invented Fredrika and Maurice and their parents? You imagined them?"

"Yes, but now they are real. I'd do anything for them. I want them to come back."

"To—come back?"

"Yes. I want the old house to be happy again. I want that more than anything in the world."

After a long silence, he said:

"We won't tell any one about this. It shall be a secret between us. But if you want to talk to me at any time, you'd come, wouldn't you?"

"Yes, I'd come."

He pressed a bell and a few moments later my father came into the consulting-room.

After a long talk about how essential it was that I should not be excited when I went to bed, my father said it was not surprising that I was "highly strung" because I was going to be an artist. Then he took some of my drawings from a portfolio and handed them to the doctor.

He held them in his broad hands, looked at each in turn, then said:

"You say he is *going* to be an artist. It seems to me that he *is* one. These are very remarkable."

Almost immediately, he went on:

"This boy is remarkably sensitive and——"

He broke off, turned to me and said there was a small collection of rare butterflies in the next room and perhaps I'd like to look at them. I said I would, so he took me into a kind of study, then returned to my father.

Directly I got home, I raced round, looking for Hilda and eventually found her in the little workroom at the back of the house. I must have flung the door open tempestuously, because she shot to her feet, then exclaimed :

"What on earth's happened now?"

"What on earth's happened now?
"We've been to Dr. Gandy, and—"

" Well, I know that ! "

"Well, I know that.
" "I got to tell me something."

"*Get to tell me
yen's sake?*"

"*itive. Now, what's that mean—*

exact

" 's not paid good money to be told

1

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“**feel things that others don’t**”

I feel things that others don't. After a few moments, then asked:

" a few moments, then asked :
" s that others don't ? "

do? You're uncanny—that's what you!

not with them. Yes, you do ! Often, when I call you in the morning, you'll say that your mother's had a bad night—which is true enough, but how do you know it ?"

I said nothing, so she went on:

"It's because you're sensitive that you walk in your sleep. A nice shock you gave your father last night! D'you know what your tutor says about you?"

"No. What's he say?"

"He says that imaginary things are more real to you than actual ones. Those were his very words. Still, it's not your fault. You haven't had much chance—what with being born in Paris, and then running about all those foreign countries! Besides—"

She broke off, looked at me long and earnestly, then said :

"Aren't you afraid of yourself sometimes?"

"No. Why should I be?"

"Weren't you, last night, when you woke up and found yourself out in the lane?"

"I'd rather have gone on dreaming."

"Well, don't you walk in your sleep into my room again."

"Why not? You look jolly in bed."

"Oh get along with you! You're too much for me. And that's a fact."

When I left her, I went into the garden. October stillness hushed everything: even fiery asters and huge-headed dahlias seemed asleep. I walked on till I reached the little stream, dividing the terraced garden from the orchard—the little stream which kept whispering the same thing to itself, over and over and over again.

Then I remembered that although I had told Dr. Gandy a lot about Fredrika, I had not said anything about the drawings I had done of her. I was glad I'd said nothing about them. I kept them in a big black portfolio—and had never shown them to any one.

7

In every childhood there is someone or something which captures imagination, and the Empty House with its fictitious inhabitants certainly captured mine, but it was not the only influence of those early formative years. There was another, different in kind, and one that influenced the whole of my life. It happened when I was eight. And childhood ended with it. . . .

On public holidays, hordes of trippers invaded our part of Kent, roamed through its loveliness and left a trail of litter in their tracks. They appeared in our green solitudes as suddenly as if they had shot up through trap doors, and disappeared as dramatically.

But when I left the house one radiant spring morning, I was far too intent on the glory of the day, and far too enthralled by thoughts of Fredrika, to remember that it was Whit-Monday. I had decided to explore a footpath running out of Love Lane and had no time to think about anything else.

This particular May morning was the happiest of my life. There are moments when the commonest thing is transformed—when sight becomes vision—and this was one

of them. During these moments, it is as if the world which is usually seen is the back of a tapestry, but, now, a glimpse is given of the hidden Divine design. A feeling of freedom and power possessed me. I exulted in the knowledge that I was an artist—that mine would be a dedicated life. I vowed to spare myself nothing—to surrender everything treasured by others—if only this vision remained and I were privileged to reveal it.

This exultation was so intimately related to Fredrika that I felt she was by my side.

I had walked on with no sense of direction until I had to stop in order to discover my surroundings. I stood in the middle of a winding path and, facing me, was a sloping field with a stile a few yards to the right. I decided to climb this stile, but, on reaching it, I paused to gaze at a meadow ablaze with dandelion.

I stood motionless for some minutes.

The majesty of morning was now supreme. This might have been the first day of creation—the first shy unveiling of the world.

Just as I was about to climb the stile, I looked to the left. Near a hedge, were a man and a woman—in physical intimacy.

I do not know how long I remained motionless. All I know is that revulsion circled me like stinking stagnant water. A sense of degradation, of outrage, petrified me. Something died in me—and something was born. Instinctively, I knew that I had ceased to be whole—that, henceforth, I should be divided. . . .

If you cannot imagine the effect of this experience—and the long-term effect of it—on a sensitive wholly innocent boy, do not read another word. It would be a waste of time.

Three days later.

It had rained heavily since dawn and, at four o'clock, it was still raining, but I scarcely noticed it. For the last few days I had left my room only for meals and had no interest whatsoever in the world outside.

Soon after four o'clock, the door was thrown open and Hilda appeared.

“What on earth’s the matter with you? Shutting yourself up here, hour after hour! Are you ill?”

"I'm not ill."

"Well, what is it, then?"

"Leave me alone."

She looked at me intently for some moments, then said :

"It's a shame about you. It is, straight ! Nothing to do but moon about by yourself ! Why don't they send you to school, instead of going on with that old stick of a tutor ? You ought to mix with boys of your own age."

"I don't want anything."

There was a long silence, then she asked :

"Do you still wonder about the people who used to live in that empty house ?"

"Sometimes."

"Well, I'm going to tell you about them. It will give you something to think about—and that's better than doing nothing but mope up here for hours on end. But don't you tell any one I've told you."

"I shan't tell any one."

"Mind you don't ! Anyhow, you're sure to find out sooner or later, so I may as well tell you."

After a pause, she went on :

"This is what happened. The year you were born, a family was living in that house—a man and his wife and two children. A boy and a girl. About eight, they were. You never saw such a happy family. The mother was lovely, and the children were admired for miles round."

She looked sideways, as if to make certain we were alone, then went on :

"Well, suddenly, the father was ruined—ruined in a day, as you might say. He came home—shot his wife—shot the children—then shot himself."

Almost immediately, she added :

"The next morning, the milkman discovered what had happened. He ran to Dr. Gandy, who went with him to the house. So now you know why no one will live there. And—what's the matter with you ?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing ! You're white as a sheet ! I only told you because—"

"I'm going out."

"What on earth for ? You'll get wet through."

"I don't care."

It had stopped raining, but great drops fell from drenched trees. I hurried on, noticing nothing, till I reached the rusty gates.

Everything was dank, shrouded.

Although my hands trembled, I opened the gates, then walked slowly down the nettle-covered drive. With every step, terror increased. I dared not look back, because I was certain that phantoms followed me. At last I stood in the porch, facing the tentacled creeper.

Then I knelt and prayed—as I had never prayed.

And then I cried—as I had never cried.

8

That was how childhood ended, like the descent of a curtain on a sunlit scene.

I went to a public school when I was twelve and the first result of leaving home and finding myself with companions of my own age was that I began to see my parents in more realistic perspective and recognised, therefore, how isolated they were from the everyday world. Nothing revealed the nature of this isolation more pathetically than the fact that their frustrated ambitions found vicarious satisfaction in anticipating the brilliant career which, they were convinced, awaited me as an artist. Anyhow, a few weeks at school made it very clear that I had never had a home in the customary sense of the word, and that my childhood had been an extremely lonely one.

But I made many discoveries during my first term, because companionship with boys of my own age provided a standard which enabled me to compare my experiences with those of others, and this soon revealed the extent to which I had lived in a world remote from the actual one. So remote, that I was a stranger among normal human beings—and likely to remain a stranger. It became very evident that, although I was popular with other boys, they regarded me as odd in many ways—especially my “shyness” regarding sex.

In those days, there was no sex instruction either at home or at school, with the result that information was picked up in the gutter of bawdy jokes and obscene stories.

My companions soon noticed that these embarrassed and humiliated me, consequently I became the chief target for them. This gutter-initiation into the details of sex had two main effects : it deepened the revulsion I had felt on that Whit-Monday ; and it associated sex more and more intimately with disgust and degradation.

During my third term, however, an event occurred which astonished others, nearly as much as it astonished me, and which gave me an entirely new status with boys of my own age.

This event was a sudden friendship with Ronald Bayes—a first-class athlete and the head of the school. As Bayes was also wellborn, remarkable in appearance, and universally idolised, it follows that he inhabited a realm far removed from my obscurity. Incidentally, Bayes was one of those rare beings who not only seem predestined to eminence, but are genuinely unaware of the superiority which makes eminence inevitable.

No one in the school knew that I was an artist and, although I did many drawings during my leisure, I hid them with the care and the cunning of a miser. This was not through fear of criticism but through habit. As a child, my deepest experiences had been unshared : I had told no one about Fredrika, with the solitary exception of Dr. Gandy ; and I had told no one of the revulsion endured on that Whit-Monday—consequently it had become automatic to hide my deepest experiences and activities from others.

One day, during my third term, Bayes came to the Lower School to talk to us about something or other, but what it was I have no idea because I did not listen to one word. I was at a desk in the front, somewhat apart from the others, and, directly Bayes began to speak, I suddenly "saw" him as I had never seen him. Time, place, circumstances were instantly forgotten and I began to draw this new Bayes who had emerged so miraculously from the familiar one.

As the others were listening intently, my activities were unnoticed, and would have remained unnoticed if my absorption had not been so complete that I went on with the drawing after the lecture had ended and the audience had trooped out into the playground.

" Hallo ! What have you got there ? "

Bayes ! Standing by my desk !

I handed him the drawing.

He studied it for some little time, while I realised the staggering fact that I was alone with the idolised Bayes.

At last he said :

“ What’s your name ? ”

“ Arnold. Max Arnold.”

Then, indicating the drawing, he asked :

“ Can I have this for a few days ? ”

“ Of course. Keep it, if you want to.”

“ I’m going home this week-end and I’d like to show it to my people.”

As he turned away, I exclaimed :

“ You won’t tell the others ! ”

He laughed, then said :

“ All right. But they’ll know one day. A lot of people will know—one day.”

A week later, a unique sensation electrified the Lower School. Bayes’s people had asked Arnold to spend the half-term holiday with them ! And Arnold was going ! It was unheard-of, unbelievable ! Then it came out that I had done a drawing of Bayes and that his people thought it a “ masterpiece.” My stock rocketed heavens high. Sticky sweets were passed to me during the Scripture class. The head master became a visible mortal, instead of a misty Olympian. The matron suddenly decided that I needed scalding cocoa every night before going to bed.

During the days before my visit, I made many discoveries about the Bayes family. Ronald was the only child ; his father was the twelfth baronet ; his mother was very beautiful. Their place was Manor Hall, an historic Tudor house, about twenty miles from the school. It was all rather overwhelming, but what particularly disturbed me was the matron’s concern about my underwear—a concern so frenzied that I imagined I should appear in those somewhat undignified garments.

The day arrived. The head master saw us off. A large car was waiting. Bayes drove and I sat by his side—an immaculate young chauffeur having been relegated to a back seat.

We shot along country roads—raced through monumental gates—flashed past a lodge—streaked up a long drive, with a never-ending park on either side, until a

sudden bend revealed a house like a medieval castle enclosed by a moat and a wall.

On arrival, so many things claimed my attention simultaneously that all became merged in a blur, and it was only in retrospect that various incidents became detached, like individuals leaving a crowd.

Not only had I never entered a house like Manor Hall, but I had never met any one like Sir Ronald Bayes or his lovely wife. Perhaps it was their directness, their simplicity, and the way in which they invested everything they said or did with an air of inevitability, that distinguished them. I realised, years afterwards, that they on their side had not encountered any one like me, but I did not suspect this at the time because neither showed any hint of surprise or trace of curiosity. What I did find rather embarrassing was their enthusiasm for my drawing which occupied a prominent place in Sir Ronald's study and which, he told me, he was going to show to Oswald Otway, the art critic.

But even while I talked to them, my imagination was actively trying to assess what it must be like to *live* in a house like this. I felt surrounded by history—which was a very different sensation from that caused by reading it ! When I explored the extraordinary collection of halls and small rooms, which had been enlarged, as necessity or the personal whims of former occupants had decreed, I had the strange feeling that it would be difficult to return to the modern world. I stayed so long in the gallery with its rows of family portraits and famous pictures that eventually a footman appeared to tell me that luncheon was served. I went to the dining-room and, for the first time, encountered a butler. An experience which necessitated certain changes in my conception of the Almighty.

The next afternoon, when Ronald was out riding with his father, I had tea alone with Lady Bayes, who encouraged me to talk about myself, so I told her that I had been born in Paris and had spent the first seven years of my life travelling all over Europe with my parents. Then I described our home in Kent and although she showed no surprise I felt that she *was* surprised. She became even kinder and her grey eyes had a new expression which made me very happy to be with her.

“ So you did not go to a preparatory school ? ”

"No. I had a tutor. Perhaps that was because I used to walk in my sleep."

"That must have been very disturbing for your parents. Did you often walk in your sleep?"

"Oh yes, often—till I was eight. Sometimes I only went to the stables to pat a puppy I liked very much, but once I walked in my sleep to a house near ours—an empty house."

"How very alarming! I can understand your walking in your sleep to the stables, as you were so fond of the puppy, but you couldn't have cared about an empty house."

"But I did! I loved it—more than anything. And I still do."

After a silence, she asked about my drawing and I told her that I could draw before I could write and that my father knew a lot about art and had taken me to all the famous galleries in Europe. I also told her that, from the age of eight till I went to school, I had studied with Michael Drake, the artist, who lived near us. And then I told her that, when I left school, I wanted to go to Paris to study painting.

When I finished, she did not say anything, but looked at me with a speculative expression as if she were trying to visualise my future. I can see her now as she was then, in the mellow maturity of her remarkable beauty.

That was my first visit.

Ronald left at the end of the term, went up to Oxford, and I did not see him again till I spent a week-end at Manor Hall in July, 1914. When war broke out, Ronald obtained a commission in a famous regiment. I dined with him in London just before he went into training.

Nothing could indicate the quality of his personal magnetism more plainly than the fact that he was remembered by all the boys who had known him at school. Even the excitement caused by the war did not obliterate memories of Bayes and every one of us was convinced that he would have an exceptional and a brilliant career.

I remember the day when we heard he had gone to the front. I remember the day when we heard that he had been decorated for valour. And I remember the day when we heard that he had been killed in action.

I was in the senior quadrangle. A boy in the fifth form ran up and said breathlessly:

"Heard about Bayes?"

"No—what?"

"Killed in action."

Everything became very still. Everything was listening. Something slowly collapsed in me, leaving a great emptiness.

Then I discovered that I hated this boy in the fifth form. I hated him for being alive. And I hated him for the way he had said : "Killed in action."

I left him without a word, but before I had gone a hundred yards I came to a standstill.

It was only old people who died ! Bent, mouldering, tired, old people, who went to sleep one day—and did not wake. Not *Bayes*. Not the swift slender *Bayes*, with the flourish of youth on his brow and worlds of expectation in his eyes ! What had death to do with him ?

Suddenly, gratitude overwhelmed every other emotion. He had transformed my life at school—he had deepened my confidence—he had revealed new horizons by taking me to his home. I vowed never to forget him. Never ! Even if I lived to be a hundred !

Two days later, the head master sent for me.

I no longer regarded his austere study as the ante-room of doom. He no longer seemed a superman figure of obliterating majesty. I now saw an ageing lonely man of rigid principles and static opinions, who was as incapable of change as a monument.

He recognised my presence with ponderous formality, then told me that something most unusual had occurred which would involve me in an undertaking demanding tact and delicacy. He hoped I possessed those rare qualities.

Then, having regarded me with lugubrious pessimism, he added that I had doubtless heard of Ronald *Bayes*'s death in action but that, with my social background, I could form no conception of what this loss meant to Sir Ronald and Lady *Bayes*. No conception whatever.

A prolonged pause—to enable me to dwindle to dwarf-like dimensions—then he added that Sir Ronald and Lady *Bayes* had lost their only child, consequently their long and most distinguished line had come to an end. It was understandable, therefore, that Sir Ronald and his wife wished to see no one.

The emphasis on the last two words made it plain that they did not wish to see even the head master.

This being so, he continued, it was most remarkable that they wanted to see me. In fact, inexplicable. However, that was their wish, so, the next day, a car would fetch me at about four o'clock and bring me back at six. He could only hope that I should prove equal to a situation demanding extreme delicacy.

After which, I was dismissed from the presence.

Although the motive for this invitation baffled the head master, it seemed certain to me that the Bayes wanted to know whether I had another drawing of Ronald. I felt so sure of this that I decided to take a sketch of him, in uniform, which I had done soon after we had dined together in London.

The car arrived, but the immaculate young chauffeur had evidently gone to the war, for a much older man was at the wheel. He said very little and sometimes, when I asked a question, his only reply was a despondent shake of the head.

When the car stopped in front of the castle-like edifice, I hoped he would give some advice, but, as he remained silent, I said :

“ I shan’t know what to say to them.”

“ It don’t matter what you say—or what any one says.”

As I followed the footman up the staircase, it shocked me to discover that nothing had changed. Everything was exactly as it had alway been and this made it impossible to believe that Ronald was dead.

I heard my name announced, then found myself with a man and a woman who were familiar yet strange. Familiar, because neither had altered superficially ; strange, because an immense distance seemed to separate me from them.

They talked about ordinary things and it was only when my nervousness had lessened to some extent that I noticed how slowly Sir Ronald spoke, and how—whenever his wife was not looking at him—he glanced swiftly at her. She seemed as if she were impersonating herself and, more than once, he had to repeat a question before she replied.

After tea, he reminded me that the drawing I had given them of Ronald had been sent to an exhibition, but, possibly, I had another which they had not seen.

I said that I had—and that I had brought it with me and left it downstairs.

Instantly, she was on her feet, but he exclaimed :

“ Not now ! Later ! ”

“ No ! Now ! ”

He made an odd movement with his hand, which I interpreted as a request to fetch the drawing, so, without saying anything, I hurried from the room.

When I returned, their attitudes were unchanged and I was certain they had not spoken. I stopped in the doorway, not knowing what to do.

Then he said to her :

“ Later ! Not now—later ! ”

I do not know how long we remained motionless, but at last I went towards them. As I came level with her, she took the drawing. For an instant, she looked at me, as if she had just realised who I was and wondered why I was there, then she glanced at the drawing. The next moment, she hurried from the room.

He stood, staring at the open door, then sank into a chair and covered his face with his hands.

I went slowly out of the room and silently down the stairs.

I never saw her again.

Years later, I met Sir Ronald in London. He was prematurely old and lived alone in a service flat.

9

At the end of the 1917 Easter holidays, I had a talk with Hilda which made it very clear that my parents' backwater existence was about to be roughly disturbed.

Hilda was helping me to pack, when she suddenly asked if I were sorry the holidays were over and I told her I was not, because my parents had become so odd that it was impossible to ask any one to the house and that, one way and another, I dreaded the holidays and was thankful when they were over.

Then she asked if it ever occurred to me that *she* was with them all the time—and just what kind of a life did I think hers was ? Before I could reply, she told me that she had been engaged for three years—had postponed her marriage twice—and that her young man was “ properly fed up with the whole business.”

She ended by saying :

"It's all right for you. You'll leave school in a year and go to Paris to study. And what happens to me? I'm in a trap. If I say I want to leave, they make me feel like a criminal. They never seem to think that I've got a life to live just like any one else. Anyhow, one thing's certain —things can't go on as they are."

I stared at her. It was difficult to reconcile this Hilda with the one who had remained static in my memory. I had never visualised her outside the setting in which I had always known her, consequently it was difficult to realise that she regarded that setting as a trap from which she was determined to escape.

"My mother keeps saying that I've got to make up my mind. She knew a girl who went into service with an old lady and got caught, good and proper. Didn't want to stay—and daren't leave. Anyway, I can't go on much longer like this—and I'm not going to."

I stayed awake most of that night trying to find a solution to this utterly unexpected problem, but the only result was to realise more fully than ever before how dependent my parents were on Hilda and how helpless they would be without her.

A day or two later, however, I had a conversation with Dr. Gandy which placed Hilda, and everything else, on an entirely new background.

The doctor had been visiting the house daily for some time and had often talked to me for a few minutes when he came downstairs but, on this occasion, he suggested that I should walk along the drive with him as there were certain facts which, in his opinion, I ought to know.

He began by asking some questions about my plans and I told him that I should leave school in a year, then go to Paris to study painting under Marcel Bon. I went on to say that the only thing troubling me was Hilda, who wanted to leave to get married, and I could not imagine what my parents would do without her.

"That makes what I have to say somewhat easier, Max. All the same, it will be a shock."

After a pause, he asked :

"Have you ever thought that your parents might not live long?"

"I've thought that my mother might not—as she's always ill and has been for years. But there's nothing the matter with father, is there?"

He stopped, then said :

"It's better to be frank. It's unlikely that your father will live more than a few months. That has been my opinion for some weeks, but, unfortunately, it was confirmed by Sir Arthur Green, the eminent heart specialist. You remember he came here a week ago. I'm afraid we must face the fact that your father might die at any time and, if he does, I doubt if your mother would long survive him."

A bird darted across the drive and I knew I should always remember its sudden flight—and the solitary cloud on the horizon—and our shadows which seemed to be whispering. But, above all, I should remember my horror at not being more horrified.

When I left the doctor, and walked back up the drive, I *knew* that our life here was over. Soon, I should leave this old rambling house and never see it again. Another family would live here. Perhaps another boy would wander in the terraced garden, cross the little bridge over the stream, climb the sloping orchard. Perhaps, on some May morning, he would walk down the twisting lane—till he reached the Empty House. Perhaps he would stand by the rusty gates and gaze at the tentacled creeper hiding the front door. Perhaps he would dream about the people who had once lived there and wonder why they had left.

Directly I reached the house, I ran swiftly up the stairs, then hurried into the little workroom overlooking the garden.

"Heavens!" Hilda exclaimed. "Must you always rush into a room like a lunatic?"

"Listen! Listen. I've something to tell you—something important. I've been talking to Dr. Gandy. You don't have to worry about staying on here."

"Why not?"

"The doctor says father may die at any time—and he does not think mother would long survive him."

The garment she was sewing fell to the floor, then she rose slowly.

"Is that why the specialist came last week?"

"Yes."

Then, to my astonishment, she sank into the chair and began to sob.

"But I thought you wanted to be free, Hilda!"

"Not like that . . . not like that! It's—terrible!"

There was a long silence.

At last she said :

"And you could stand there, and tell me *that*—just as if it had nothing to do with you!"

"You don't understand! You don't understand anything! What d'you want me to do? Lie? Didn't I tell you, a day or two ago, that I was thankful the holidays were over? D'you think *I'd* want to live here? I know they've said I can go to Paris when I leave school, but you can't count on a thing they say nowadays. If *you* go, they'll want *me* to stay."

She said nothing, so I raced on :

"I'm not going to pretend. I want to be free. I've work to do which I *must* do. And, anyway, what do they care about me nowadays?"

Her silence irritated me, so I almost shouted :

"Well, *what—do—they?* All they want is to mope together, month after month, year after year! I should go off my head if I stayed here alone with them."

"You were fond of them—once."

"And they were fond of me—once."

"So you want them to die?"

"I—do—not—want—them—to—die! Can't you see that I'm afraid of becoming like them—that I'm *terrified* of becoming like them? If I were here alone with them, I should become as queer as they are. Don't sit there, staring at me! D'you understand a word I'm saying?"

"Yes, but—"

She broke off, gazed up at me with an odd expression, then said :

"You'll have a strange life."

"I dare say. But it will be *mine*. And that's all I care about."

She said nothing and I left her. . . .

My parents died in December, 1917. A year later, the war ended and I left school.

I was eighteen—and I was free.

" You must interrupt, Max, if I say anything you don't understand. I am your guardian, as well as your lawyer, and I want to help you if I can."

Then, having patted my knee, John Gurney looked round his office which was on the second floor of an old house near Lincoln's Inn Fields. Although he was nearly sixty, his cherubic features and ivory-white hair suggested almost Pickwickian benevolence, but this impression was somewhat undermined by encountering the direct glance of his enigmatic grey eyes. As a boy, I had often come to this room with my father, but, on every occasion, Gurney had consistently ignored me, so it seemed strange to be here in the exalted rôle of client.

" You know the old saying, Max, about *de mortuis*, but facts are facts—and the dominant fact is that your father behaved very unwisely during the latter part of his life. Very unwisely indeed!"

He went on to explain that my father had never had any money sense and that, during the war, he had tried to retrieve his financial position by speculation, with the customary result. It had been useless to argue with him because he was like a man in a trance. Still, it was only fair to say that my mother's illness during so many years had been a considerable and recurrent drain on his dwindling resources.

" When death duties, debts and legacies are paid—and when your expenses during the next few years have been met—there will not be a lot left."

He paused, then added :

" Don't think I am criticising your father. I am not. I will give you one example—one of many—of his total lack of perspective in money matters. When he signed his will here, three years ago, in this room, he must have known perfectly well that he could not provide for you as adequately as you had every right to expect. Knowing that, what did he do? Left a handsome legacy to a domestic servant named Hilda."

" I'm glad of that! Awfully glad!"

Gurney raised his hands, as if to protect himself from the shafts of folly.

" You don't understand," I went on. " My parents owed no end to Hilda. She put off her marriage twice rather than leave them."

" Yes, yes ! I am sure she did. I only wish your father had had the business acumen of Miss Hilda. But never mind that now. The point is, Max, that owing to your uncle's death in the war, you are alone in the world. Till you come of age, I am your guardian—so I have a moral responsibility regarding you as well as a legal one."

Then, abandoning his professional manner with dramatic abruptness, he leaned forward and said with genuine feeling :

" If I don't say certain things to you, Max, no one else will. And the first thing I want to do is to warn you."

" Warn me ! "

" Yes. I know it was decided long ago that you should go to Paris to study when you left school. Well, I am bound to tell you that I think that was a most unwise decision."

Before I could speak, he went on :

" I do not say you are not gifted. You may be greatly gifted—but that does not affect the issue, as I see it."

He paused, then continued :

" I shall have to speak very plainly. Your parents were far from normal. Your childhood and boyhood—till you went to school—were far from normal. All your early experience was exceptional—and the effects of early experience remain operative through the whole of a man's life. Now, I do not want to remind you of unpleasant things which, fortunately, belong to the past, but it remains a fact that you were an extremely sensitive child. Your father was deeply disturbed by the discovery that you walked in your sleep, although, naturally, he made light of it—to you—at the time."

After a prolonged pause, he added :

" What you need, Max, is balance—stability. Will you find either, living an artist's life in Paris ? You will not be rich, but you will be financially independent for some years. You are imaginative—impressionable. You will, therefore, respond to your environment—to the inducements and temptations of your environment. You are what a friend of mine calls the ' psychic type.' It's written all over you. So you'll have more than one world to deal with. You will say that your work is everything to you. But artists are not

always inspired and, when their vision deserts them, they are capable of follies unknown to the ordinary man. It is necessary to read only a few biographies to discover that fact. And I have read a great many biographies."

Again I tried to speak, but he stopped me.

"Let me have my say. You'll go your own way—I know that—but it doesn't absolve me from saying what I think is necessary to be said. Besides, in one way, I have the right to speak as I am doing. I was fond of your mother long before she married. So fond of her, that I remained a bachelor. For that reason, if for none other, I want to help you if I can. Now, I've no doubt that what is called happiness seems a very pedestrian thing to you. When your mother believed, and had every reason to believe, that she was on the threshold of a brilliant career, happiness—ordinary human happiness—seemed a very pedestrian thing to *her*. But she changed her opinion when the chance of it vanished for ever."

"Listen!" I exclaimed. "I've no choice. None whatever! I've work to do, which only I can do, and I've got to do it. I don't care tuppence about anything else. I've lived with one aim for years: to go to Paris and study under Marcel Bon. When I heard, a long time ago, that Oswald Otway, the art-critic, had shown some of my work to Bon and Bon said he would take me as a pupil, I was mad with joy. I've lived for that. And you think I'm going to give it up! You think I'm going to throw in being an artist for the sake of what you call happiness! I don't want to go through the world half-dead!"

Before he could say anything, I raced on:

"All you say is true enough. My parents were queer—and they brought me up in a queer way. I know it. I've reason to. It was made very plain when I went to school. But what's all that to do with anything now? I'm not expecting an easy time. I know more about myself than you think. Much more. My parents were isolated. And I'm isolated—in a different way. It won't be a picnic—I know that. You're right about the effects of early experience. Something happens when you're a child—and it's years before you discover what it has done to you. I know all that. But I also know what I've got to do. And I care about nothing else."

“ Nothing ? ”

“ You mean women. You think I’ll go with a lot of women when I get to Paris. Well, you’re wrong. I loathe all that. I like women, but I loathe—that. It only seems attractive when everything else deserts you.”

He said nothing and I went on to argue that I should go to Marcel Bon immediately, but, after a long discussion, we agreed to postpone my going to Paris till I was twenty-one. In the meantime, I would study at an art school in London.

During the next three years, I lunched or dined with Gurney every week and the more intimate we became, the more I was surprised by the extraordinary contrast between the lawyer and the man. The latter had remarkable knowledge of all sorts of out-of-the-way subjects—and an almost embarrassing insight into the psychology of others. So much so that it was long after his death, in 1927, that I discovered the implications of things he had told me about myself while we walked together in Richmond Park on Sunday afternoons.

II

These scenes from the past rose before me with such reality that I was as unaware of my actual surroundings as a man in a trance. And I should have remained unaware of them if the repeated and mechanical ringing of a bell had not startled me back to the present.

Nevertheless, for some moments, the sitting-room of this Chelsea flat seemed strange. I looked in turn at the military text-books on the shelves ; at the solitary etching ; at the encyclopædia in its revolving case ; but the sensation of strangeness persisted and I found it difficult to believe that this had been my “ home ” since the outbreak of war, over five years ago.

Meanwhile, the bell continued to ring with robot regularity. I crossed to the telephone, picked up the receiver and gave my name.

It was Mervyn Maitland.

“ Listen, Max ! I’ve been worried about you ever since I put you into that taxi after lunch. You really did look simply ghastly at the club. I know it’s insane to telephone

a sick man at four in the morning to ask how he is, but I can't sleep for thinking about you. I stayed late at the club. What? Yes, devilish late. Four or five of us were talking about the Carol Norton murder. It's going to be a sensation all right. One fellow said the police already have a clue. When I left the club, I went to Jimmy Letts' place. I'm sleeping there. You know Jimmy. Oh, surely! Used to be a journalist—now at Ministry of Information—married a contortionist. But what I want to know is—are you better? That's grand! And I didn't wake you up? That's grand too! Let's meet soon. Oh, by the way, Antony Lawless knew Carol Norton. I haven't seen him for years, but they tell me he used to take her out quite a bit. Incidentally, her photograph is in the evening paper. You haven't seen it? I've been staring at it for an hour—and it does things to you. At least, it does to me. Well, look after yourself. And let me know if there's anything I can do."

I put down the receiver.

Only twelve hours since Mervyn put me in that taxi! . . . It was four in the morning. . . . They were all talking about the Carol Norton murder. . . . The police had a clue. . . .

Then I realised how unbelievably stupid I had been not to tell Mervyn that I knew Carol. To-morrow, or the next day, he and every one else would know that she had been the model for a nude I had painted about three years ago. The picture had fetched a remarkable price on changing hands for the second time, but the more important fact was that my agent had sold the copyright to its first purchaser, a dealer, who had disposed of reproduction rights to a printer—with the result that reproductions of the picture had been on sale in the shops for a long time, and might be still, for all I knew. It was quite certain, therefore, that I should be intimately associated with a melodramatic murder—and one in which Mervyn was very interested. And I had not told him that I knew Carol!

But nothing makes a man act so automatically as habit, and I had never discussed Carol with any one. She knew that I wanted secrecy and I am certain she told no one that we were lovers. Or almost certain.

The dominant fact in the whole situation is that I

loathed my physical dependence on her. I hated her because she symbolised that servitude as no other woman had done. This was inevitable because sex, for me, has always been apostacy—profanation—a Black Mass. I know perfectly well that this is the long-term result of the revulsion felt on that Whit-Monday, when I was a boy of eight and wholly innocent. Of course I know it ! But I also know that the effect of overwhelming emotional experience is not removed by logic. It is eradicated only by a deeper emotional experience, different in kind from the original one. Logic won't deliver you from lust. Only love can do that.

But what did all this matter now ?

Had I murdered Carol ?

That was the issue, and I was alone with it—and should remain alone with it. Whether others would suspect me, whether I should be tried and found guilty, seemed wholly secondary. In dire emergency, you find yourself in a realm remote from humanity, ringed by principalities and powers. In dire emergency, you discover that your past—which appeared to be as fixed and defined as a frozen river—assumes an entirely new aspect, wholly related to the issue confronting you. Everything irrelevant to that issue becomes obscure ; everything relevant to it is illuminated.

No greater illusion exists than the belief that the past is incapable of change—that memory is a static landscape. Memory is plastic to the mood which invokes it. We have as many pasts as we have moods.

Two days ago, it would have been impossible to imagine that *Carol* would dominate my thoughts—floodlighting everything I long to forget and darkening everything I love to remember. But now she so rules my mind that everything exists only in relation to her ; and that is difficult to believe because, two days ago, she would not have been even a background figure in the picture of the past.

Wholly other memories would have claimed me. Perhaps the vicissitudes of my life as an artist since I went to Paris as a pupil of Marcel Bon. Or perhaps I should have relived my travels during the years between the wars ; glimpsing countless faces, hearing innumerable voices. Or I might have visualised my studio-villa at Avignon, which I bought with the legacy left me by John Gurney. That

villa contains everything I treasure : my mother's portrait by Zuter ; my father's books ; his study furniture ; the little blue table at which Hilda and I so often had tea on winter afternoons. It contains the collection of rare butterflies left me by Dr. Gandy—Marcel Bon's study of the Pont Neuf, which he gave me just before he died—drawings and books given me by artists and authors. That villa epitomises everything I love to remember. It is more evocative than any diary. And it has probably been looted by the Germans.

But my most precious memories are of creative moments when simply to look at the world is wonder and delight. God-given moments when every common thing blazes with beauty—when the familiar is raised in glory—when the whole of one's being sees, not merely the habit-shrouded eyes. Moments when the ephemeral reveals its eternal aspect. Moments when nothing is known, understood, possessed—when all is miraculous—when to see is to pray.

My work depended on these creative moments (these "Fredrika" moments, as I always call them) and it was during them, and only during them, that I became free. This freedom—the freedom of child-like contemplation—seemed so inevitable that I dreamed it would be permanent.

I soon discovered, however, that sensitivity had a dual aspect. To respond to one type of stimulus involves susceptibility to inducements emanating from a very different direction. It has been said that : "To become sufficiently refined to appreciate Beethoven is merely to have transferred oneself to the level on which one can, for the first time, realise the significance of the Marquis de Sade." It is terribly true. Most artists are pendulous between mighty opposites. Only the greatest effect a marriage between heaven and hell.

I soon discovered that my "Fredrika" moments ended as abruptly as they began ; then, exiled from Eden, I found myself confronted by the desert of actuality. Temperament and upbringing had made me open—almost mediumistic—to psychic environment, consequently, directly I became negative, I had no defence against the demons which infect the fear-crazed modern world. Although this may have been the case with me to an exceptional extent, it was a common enough experience, during the years between the wars, for countless people suddenly to feel compelled to fling

themselves into excesses with no more volition than automatons. Heaps of men and women have told me that, in an instant, will-power deserted them and they committed follies which, in retrospect, seemed to belong to a nightmare.

Years ago, I read in one of my father's less esoteric books on occultism that sensitive persons are susceptible to "other world" influences which cannot penetrate the phlegmatic. All sensitive people are subject to periods of depression and, during these, they easily become obsessed by evil entities. "The denizens of the next plane and especially the excarnated minds of depraved men and women utilise mankind for the purpose of vicarious enjoyment. In cases of emotional insanity, where a man temporarily loses self-control and murders another, could the matter be investigated psychically, it would be seen that the murderer was often an unconscious victim of a disembodied fiend, who desired to commit the murder, and used the unfortunate sensitive as an instrument."

The author developed this theme at some length and although I imagine we must accept responsibility for all our visitors, whether they be physical or "excarnate," the theory interested me because it does give an explanation of the sudden paralysis of my will which always preceded degradation ; and it does stress that those subject to depression are most susceptible to malevolent influences. Hamlet evidently knew this, or he would not have said that the devil

Out of my weakness and my melancholy,
As he is very potent with such spirits,
Abuses me to damn me.

Anyhow, be that as it may, all I know is that directly my imagination ceased to be creative, I frequently became subject to a depression which left me defenceless against the assault of astral forces.

Most modern pleasure-seeking and most modern vice is a despairing attempt to escape from the knowledge of inner emptiness. The days when physical excess represented overflowing exuberance vanished long ago. Then, the body had a fling ; now, the mind tries to. It is frustration, boredom, bewilderment, dread of the future, which goads

moderns to drink, sex, drugs. This was certainly the case between the wars, when fear was as enveloping, and as formless, as drifting fog.

What amazed me was the suddenness with which depression would overwhelm me, especially in the stony maze of a great city. In an instant, the streets, the passers-by, the barrack-like buildings, the noise, became unendurable. I would look at my watch, discover that it was three in the afternoon, and experience a feeling not far removed from terror at the thought of the hours ahead. The most annihilating type of isolation—the isolation of an individual lonely in a crowd—numbed me. *Anything* that was different from this monotony—anything that was a total contrast to grey uniformity—became irresistibly alluring. There are moments when hell seems infinitely preferable to the pavement.

It was in this mood, and only in this mood, that desire for Carol dominated me. It was revolt against the apathy, the inertia, the emptiness of mechanised existence which goaded me to her.

None knew better than I the results of an “expense of spirit in a waste of shame,” but this knowledge did not deter me. You are not particularly susceptible to the censure of logic when your will has melted like wax in a furnace.

Carol became so associated with these moods that she symbolised them. She was the only woman with whom I have had continuing relations, but I do not know what those relations meant to her—apart from their financial aspect. I visited her only under compulsion and knew nothing of her history, and wanted to know nothing. She was a drug. I hated her knowledge of me, her power over me, and dreamed of the day when I should be free of her for ever. . . .

I remember every detail of our first meeting at Harrington's house—remember it so clearly that I can watch it like a sequence in a film.

One November afternoon in 1939, when I was depressed by the prospect of being marooned for an indefinite period in London, I decided to return a book which had been lent me by the eminent painter, Hartley Harrington, who had taken an interest in me for many years and to whom I owed much.

It was one of those November afternoons which make you certain that the sun is a legend invented by despairing humanity. It would have been difficult to say which was more desolating : to look at the iron sky, or the gloom-bound streets. Everything seemed to be apathetically awaiting the end of the world.

When I reached Harrington's house, which was near Ebury Street, the maid said that he was working in the studio, so I went down the long passage leading to it, then opened the door.

He was not there but, near a screen, stood a model who had just started to dress. I do not know how long we gazed at each other, because I was wholly concerned with the exciting knowledge that here—at last—was a model for a nude ! The first I had seen in a long experience.

Then, looking more closely, I became convinced that the compression of the full lips and the bewilderment of the blue eyes were effects of recent experience, for they gave an enigmatic expression to the almost child-like candour of the features.

Meanwhile, she was studying me as if trying to place a previous meeting between us, and was so absorbed in the task that she remained unaware of present circumstances, until, eventually, she remembered them—and disappeared behind the screen.

A moment later, Harrington burst into the room. Despite eighty years of tempestuous life, the old man retained dynamic energy. He told me he'd had to break off because he had just remembered an engagement. That's why I hadn't found him in the studio. He'd have to go at once. And it was a damned nuisance ! Especially as I'd turned up, because he particularly wanted to see me. How long did I think this confounded war would last ? And was it true that I was working on camouflage ? Well, I certainly must not do that for long. Would I lunch with him soon at his club ? Good ! Excellent ! He would telephone me. And now he must go.

"But before I do go, Max, I want to show you a discovery of mine."

Then, turning towards the screen, he called out :

- "Ready, Carol ?"
- "Nearly."

"Well—hurry."

A minute later, she emerged, wearing a black suit and hat which emphasised her remarkable chestnut hair.

"Max! This young lady is Carol Norton. Take a good look at her. A really good look! Pity you didn't come earlier. She's the model for you! But, I warn you, she has off days when she won't bother about anything and looks hell. Now, I *must* go! Put those things away for me, Carol, will you?"

"I'll put them away."

There was an obedient note in the deep voice which was unexpected and appealing.

"Come to the door with me, Max. Ah! You've brought the book back! Put it in the library—will you—after I've gone?"

He took my arm and piloted me to the front door. When we reached the pavement, he stopped, glanced round, then announced :

"The devil's about! You mark my words—the devil's about! Look at that sky! Look at that street! How I loathe huge cities!"

"Not more than I do. I've always avoided them like pestilence."

"Ah, my boy, Nietzsche was right! Remember what he said? 'It is ill living in towns: too many of the lustful dwell there.' Remember?"

"Yes, I remember. He wasn't far wrong."

A moment later, he hailed a taxi and we said good-bye.

I went to the library, put the book back in its place, then returned to the hall, just as Carol was coming down the long passage from the studio.

When she was level with me, I said :

"Where do you live?"

"Chelsea."

"May I come back with you?"

"Why do you want to?"

"I can't be alone. That's why."

Now that she was near me, I realised the extent to which the compressed lips and the bewildered eyes imposed an alien expression on the candid features. But, almost immediately, I saw her—not as she was now—but as she had been in the studio.

"Do you live alone, Carol?"

"Yes. I've a flat over a shop in Mitre Street."

Then she added :

"You haven't told me your surname, so I suppose you guessed I know that you are Max Arnold."

"Yes, I suppose I did."

Then, to my astonishment, she said :

"You ought to go home and rest. You look terribly tired."

"I'm certain to go home, as you call it. I've just taken a furnished flat, belonging to a major, and it's dreary beyond description."

"All the same, you ought to go home—and rest."

"Rest!"

After a silence, she said :

"I didn't think you'd be a bit like this."

"You've thought about me, then?"

"Mr. Harrington often talks about you and your work."

"Are you free for the rest of the day?"

"I could be, if I telephoned someone."

I crossed to the hat-stand and got my hat and coat. Then I hesitated.

I knew I was on the threshold of a relationship which would be different from any I had known and I also knew, with instinctive certainty, that I ought to make an excuse, any excuse, and leave her—and not see her again. But the alternative was to spend the afternoon in Major Black's flat, surrounded by his inhospitable furniture, then, at about seven o'clock, grope my way through the black-out to the club.

I crossed quickly to her.

"Let's go! And let's get out of those infernal streets just as soon as we can!"

That was our first meeting at Harrington's house. . . .

And now—she is dead. And I cannot believe it. I cannot believe it, although I killed her.

There was not one detail, in the newspaper reports of the murder, which conflicts with the horrors seen in my "dream." Hours before her death was known to the police, I could have written a description of the murder which would have agreed at all points with their discoveries.

But the crucial fact is that, for months, I have been

obsessed with the desire to break with her. So obsessed, that I hoped she would die, because I could imagine no other means of deliverance.

Well, when I was a child, and Hilda had taken one of my glass marbles, I became so obsessed by desire to regain it that I walked in my sleep to her room and took the marble from her bag.

And, one night, when imagination was aflame with Fredrika, I dreamed I was walking to the Empty House—and woke to find myself by the rusty gates.

And, last night, I "dreamed" that I went to Carol's flat and murdered her. . . .

I began to pace slowly up and down the room. It was just dawn. It seemed an eternity since Mervyn had telephoned.

I do not know how long I continued to pace the room before an idea occurred to me and I stopped by the encyclopædia in its revolving case—took out a volume—and read the entry headed SOMNAMBULISM.

I read it slowly, especially the following sentences :

" Sometimes the actions performed are of a complicated nature and bear relation to the daily life of the sleeper. Frequently somnambulists have gone along dangerous paths, executing deliberate movements with precision."

I put the book down, then began to pace the room again.

It was useless to think. I should have to act—and act immediately. Carol had written to me a few hours before her death and I should have to give her letter to the police. They would probably wonder why I had not telephoned directly I saw the news in the paper.

But I cared nothing about the police. In a way difficult to explain, others did not exist. I have always been alone with the deepest issues in life—and I was alone with this most terrible one.

Suddenly I began to tremble. The room had become colder ! And I was no longer alone !

Then I heard a whisper, in a voice which was Carol's, and not Carol's :

" Max ! . . . Max."

PART II - - ENOUNTERS

CHAPTER ONE

THE POLICE

AT TEN O'CLOCK I telephoned Scotland Yard, saying I had certain information about Carol Norton, which might be considered important, and could call at any time convenient. After a brief delay, I was told that Chief Detective-Inspector Haimes, who was in charge of the case, would be free at noon.

I replaced the receiver and was about to unlock the drawer in which I had put Carol's letter, when I suddenly remembered that I had read only the opening sentences—which had irritated me to such an extent that I could not read the remainder.

I unlocked the drawer and took out the letter.

Tuesday Night.

Max,

I have telephoned three times, but there was no reply. If you get back to-night and are not too tired, please come and see me.

Why didn't you tell me you've been ill? I've only just heard. You can't have been alone for weeks with only a daily woman to look after you! Why didn't you telephone? Did you think I'd be no good as a nurse? I expect you thought that—but you might have given me a trial.

If you can, do come round. I can't think why, but I've been restless all day and—to-night—I do not want to be alone.

I shall wait up for you.

Do come, if you can.

CAROL.

God! It was urgent enough!

Why had she written: "If you get back to-night?" Did she think I'd been away? And why had she been nervous *that night*?

I was trying to answer these questions, when the front-door bell rang. Just as I had decided not to see any one, the letter-box was rattled in a way which told me that the visitor was Mrs. Jordan, who lived in the flat opposite and who had been extraordinarily kind during my illness.

I hurried down the passage, then opened the door.

“Good morning, Max. Sorry to come so early, but——”
She broke off, looked at me more closely, then said :

“You’re not looking so good.”

“I didn’t sleep last night. Do come in.”

When we entered the sitting-room, she turned and asked :

“When did you get back ? ”

“Get back ! I haven’t been away.”

“But you weren’t here on Tuesday night ? ”

“Yes, I was. I came in at about eleven. Why ? ”

“Some one called to see you—about ten o’clock.”

“Tuesday night ? ”

“Yes. I said—as you weren’t in—you’d probably decided to stay with a friend, rather than face the fog.”

“Was it a man or woman ? ”

“A woman. Very alluring one, with chestnut hair. You wait till my husband comes back to-morrow ! You know he always calls you ‘The Hermit.’ Well, he’ll change his opinion when—— Good heavens, Max ! What on earth’s the matter ? You look like a ghost.”

“Did you speak to her ? ”

“Yes. She was in the entrance hall when I came in. She asked if you were away. She said she’d rung several times, but you weren’t in. I said you were probably staying with a friend because of the fog. Then she wanted to know if she could write a note and leave it for you, so I asked her into my flat. I came over after lunch yesterday to tell you all this, but, as you weren’t in, I was certain you *had* stayed with a friend on Tuesday night.”

I stared at her, till she exclaimed :

“What *is* the matter, Max ? ”

“She was Carol Norton.”

“Carol Norton ? . . . *Not* the woman——”

“Who was murdered a few hours after you saw her.”

“It *can’t* be true ! ”

“It’s true enough.”

“ My God ! ”

We stared at each other.

“ That’s why the photographs in the papers were vaguely familiar. I did not read about the murder. I kept looking at the photographs. It’s—terrible ! ”

Then she added :

“ The strange thing is I nearly asked her to tell me who she was.”

“ Why ? ”

“ There was something about her I liked.”

“ Was she upset ? Frightened ? ”

“ I don’t think so. But she was certainly very anxious to see you.”

After a silence, she asked :

“ Did you know her well ? ”

“ I’ve known her for some years. She used to sit for me. I’ll have to tell you more later. I’ve got to go to Scotland Yard soon. And I shall have to tell them that Carol was here at ten o’clock on Tuesday night, and that you spoke to her. You don’t mind ? ”

“ No, of course not ! . . . When did you last see her ? ”

“ Just before I was ill.”

“ Over two months ago ? ”

“ Roughly.”

“ Why didn’t you come in yesterday, Max, and tell me all this ? ”

“ I couldn’t talk about it yesterday.”

“ I’m not surprised. And I’m not surprised that you did not sleep last night. I’d better go now, but you’ll let me know if there’s anything I can do.”

“ I’d be grateful if you’d let me spend some time in your flat. I don’t want to keep answering telephone calls.”

“ Come whenever you like—for as long as you like.”

“ Thank you.”

I saw her out, then returned to the sitting-room.

Carol had come to the flat at ten o’clock. She had spoken to a stranger—and asked if she could write a letter. Obviously, therefore, she had been desperately anxious to see me. And, presumably, only me. Why ? Why didn’t she go to Lawless ?

The more I analysed her actions, the more impossible it became to explain them.

Half an hour later, I left to keep my appointment with Detective-Inspector Haimes.

The fog had vanished, but clouds obscured the sun. The sky pulsed with planes, while the air vibrated with their multiple roar. As I passed a man with a barrow, he looked at me, winked, then said :

“ Someone’s going to get a packet. Thank the Lord it’s not us ! ”

I made some reply, then as I walked on—vaguely aware that I was taking a roundabout route to Whitehall—I discovered that I was unable to think of anything relating to Carol.

The most irrelevant thoughts and memories came into my head.

For instance, I found I was thinking about a discussion—years ago—in a Paris café. There were about a dozen men at the table, mostly foreigners, and all sorts of subjects had been discussed when Bidot, a Belgian artist, asked if any one present had ever known a murderer. Apparently no one had, and conversation was about to pass to another topic, when an Englishman—who had scarcely spoken—said he had been at a school with a boy who, twenty-five years later, was hanged for murdering a woman at Highgate.

He told us that this boy—who had a Greek father and an English mother—had been extremely popular with women, even as a schoolboy. He was most particular about his appearance and totally indifferent to the opinions of others.

Then the Englishman said :

“ I saw a good deal of The Greek, as he was called, after we left school, but, eventually, I went abroad and we did not meet again.

“ About twenty-five years later, I saw in the paper that a man with The Greek’s name had been found guilty of murdering a woman and had been condemned to death. No end of women signed a petition for reprieve, but with no effect. That was the first I’d seen of the case, but I read the reports of the trial and there was no doubt whatever that the condemned man was the boy I had known at school.

“ But this is the odd thing. As the date for The Greek’s execution got nearer, I began to remember all sorts of

trivial incidents which had happened when we were at school together—things I'd forgotten for years. It was uncanny. Here's one incident I remembered :

" All the boys used to long to steal apples from the head master's orchard, but hadn't the pluck. Well, The Greek prevailed on me to take the risk. I was scared out of my life, but I gave in because he had the will of the devil. He made me climb the biggest tree, then shinned up after me. We stuffed our pockets with apples and were about to make our getaway, when The Greek suddenly put his head to one side, listened, then slightly parted the boughs and beckoned to me. There, below, was the head master slowly approaching the tree in which we were perched. I had such a wind-up that I nearly fell off the bough—but The Greek stood like a panther poised to spring, his features lit and his black eyes blazing. I've never seen any one so *alive*. "

" I'd forgotten that escapade, years ago, but, while he was awaiting execution, I kept seeing that boy in the apple tree. The night before he was hanged, I did not sleep one wink and—at eight in the morning—I was sick as a dog.

" But perhaps this is the strangest thing of the lot. He had lived with the woman he murdered for about ten years. She was entirely ordinary—and nothing to look at. And yet he was jealous of her to the pitch of madness. They had an argument about where she had been one afternoon. He didn't believe what she said—and shot her through the heart."

Why I suddenly remembered this story, as I made my way to Scotland Yard, I cannot imagine. But every detail of that night in Paris, years ago, rose before me so clearly that I saw the circle of faces round the table ; the haze of tobacco smoke ; and heard the Englishman telling his story, while he tapped his empty pipe against the forefinger of his left hand. . . .

I reached Scotland Yard soon after twelve and, a few minutes later, was shown into Haimes's room, having been told that he would join me almost immediately.

I looked around. It was a square room, containing a big desk ; a side table on which were a number of trays, full of bundles of papers ; a steel press ; two upright chairs ; a small arm-chair ; and a sad-coloured carpet. All government offices have a mortuary-museum atmosphere

and this room was in the tradition. I had just finished my inspection when Haimes appeared.

He was under middle height—broad and powerful—and had a slow, almost shambling gait. He greeted me as if we had met before, then sat at the desk, unlocked a drawer and began to rummage among some papers.

Everything about him was massive: every movement deliberate. This man would assume nothing, overlook nothing, forget nothing. Most people have several fluctuating characteristics, but it was plain to see that Haimes had two permanent ones: power and patience. I imagined he was about forty-six, but was not certain, because men of his build attain maturity quickly and seldom alter fundamentally. Eventually, the vigorous dark hair would become white—the lines of the broad corrugated forehead would deepen—but, otherwise, he would remain unchanged till Time finally triumphed.

“Here we are!” he exclaimed in a reverberating voice, as he put a sheet of paper on the desk. “Now, Mr. Arnold, I’ll tell you what I know about you in three sentences: You are an artist. Carol Norton was your model. And a picture you painted of her some time ago fetched a remarkably good price. Now, what have you to tell me?”

“Two things. But, first, I’d better explain what my relations were with Carol Norton. Otherwise, you might get a false perspective.”

“Go ahead!”

“When I tell you that I met her several years ago, you’ll naturally think that I know a lot about her. You’d be wrong. I know practically nothing about her. You will probably find that even more surprising when I tell you that she was my mistress.”

“Nothing surprises me. You mean, you just visited her periodically for one purpose—and only one?”

“Yes. I made her an allowance—and visited her periodically. I never discussed her with any one and I know nothing about her circumstances or history. Incidentally, she ceased to model for me long ago, because I haven’t touched a brush for over three years.”

I explained the nature of the government work on which I was employed, then added:

“That’s the background. Now——”

"Just a minute ! Didn't any one know she was your mistress ? "

"Possibly a man called Antony Lawless, who is a great friend of mine."

"I know Mr. Lawless. Tell me this : Where did you meet Carol Norton ? "

"At Hartley Harrington's house."

"And when did you last see her ? "

"About two months ago."

"Right ! What are the two facts you want to tell me ? "

"The first is that I know where Carol was at ten o'clock on the night on which she was murdered."

"Now we're getting somewhere ! "

"She came to my place. I was out. She asked Mrs. Jordan—who lives in the flat opposite—if she could write a letter and leave it for me."

"Where do you live ? "

I told him my address.

"Quite near Mitre Street."

"About ten minutes' walk—if you take a short cut through an alley."

"So she wrote you a letter in Mrs. Jordan's flat."

"Yes. I've brought it with me. It's almost certain that it's the last letter she wrote. But I want to make this clear : She had never been to my flat ; and this is the only letter she ever wrote me."

I handed it to him.

"She left this at your flat soon after ten o'clock on Tuesday night. Right ? "

"Right ! "

He held the letter some little distance from him, glanced at it comprehensively, then said :

"Writes a good hand."

"Very ! "

He put the letter on the desk, then read it slowly. When he had finished, he passed his right hand through his hair—and read the letter again.

At last he said :

"You evidently didn't go—as you said you had not seen her for two months."

"No, I didn't go. I've been ill—I didn't get in till eleven o'clock on Tuesday night—and there was a fog.

Anyhow, it irritated me that she wrote. Irritated me so much that I only read the opening sentences."

"I see. She says here: 'If you get back to-night.' What made her think you were away?"

"She got the idea from Mrs. Jordan, who imagined that, as I was late, I'd decided to stay with a friend, rather than face the fog."

He picked up the letter, then read:

If you can, do come round. I can't think why, but I've been restless all day and—to-night—I do not want to be alone. I shall wait up for you. Do come, if you can.

There was a long silence.

I did not look at him. I had forgotten him. I heard Carol's voice repeat those sentences. I heard her deep, soft voice, till I felt she was in the room, near me.

I got up and began to pace to and fro as if I were alone. Eventually, I heard him say:

"She kept her word. She *did* wait up for you."

I said nothing and, after a pause, he went on:

"She was found half-dressed in bed. A reading-lamp was on—and there was a book on the floor."

"And an electric fire burning."

He looked at me quickly.

"It didn't say that in the press reports."

"Didn't it? Then I must have dreamt it. I do have odd dreams at times."

I did not know what he made of that and I did not care. Nothing makes one so reckless as boredom and, suddenly, I was seized by the insane desire to tell him about my "dream." After all, if I did tell him—if I told him every detail—he wouldn't be able to do anything about it. Obviously, it would be impossible to obtain any objective evidence to prove or disprove my story. I believe that if the silence had lasted another minute, I should have told him, but he suddenly exclaimed:

"Here's the point, Mr. Arnold! And it's an important one. She says in her letter that she did not want to be alone. Have you any guess why she did not want to be alone on that Tuesday night? Was she nervous—imaginative?"

Have you ever known her say that she did not like being alone in that flat ? ”

“ Never ! ”

“ So it’s—interesting—that she was nervous that night. It’s also—interesting—as you say she never telephoned you, or came to your flat, that she telephoned three times on Tuesday night and called at your flat at ten o’clock. And, when she found you were out, she wrote a letter and left it for you.”

“ It’s more than—interesting—it’s inexplicable.”

“ Did you ever hear her say that she disliked someone—or did not want to see someone ? Wait ! This letter is one of two things : either she was desperate to see you, and only you, on Tuesday night for some unexpected urgent reason ; or her letter was a trick to get you to go round.”

“ It wasn’t a trick. She didn’t play tricks.”

“ You trusted her, then ? ”

“ I suppose so. The real fact is that I never thought about her when I wasn’t with her.”

“ Was she fond of you ? ”

“ Good Lord, no ! I wasn’t the only man in her life. She may have admired my work, but that’s nothing to do with anything.”

After a silence, he said :

“ I’d like to see Mrs. Jordan soon.”

“ I’ll ask her to telephone.”

I rose to go, but he exclaimed :

“ Just one minute ! Tell me about that picture you painted of her. It was called *Enigma*, wasn’t it ? ”

“ Yes. It was a nude study. My agent sold it, and the copyright, to a dealer who arranged for reproductions to be put on the market. Later, it changed hands, privately, at a big price, but that did not affect me financially.”

“ Who bought it ? ”

“ I don’t know. Anyhow, it would have been difficult to find out because the man who sold it died a few weeks later. My present agent, Leslie Leete, might know who bought it, but I doubt it.”

“ There’s a reproduction in one of the papers to-day.”

“ I haven’t seen it.”

He leaned back, then gazed at the ceiling.

As the moments passed, I became more anxious to go—and more and more irritated. I knew perfectly well the power which this man represented, but I cared nothing about that. I was concerned only with Carol. If I knew, with final certainty, that I had killed her, I should not go on living. Not because she had ever meant anything to me, but because I should know that I was dominated by a will wholly alien to the one which I believe to be mine.

At last he rose, then said, pointing to Carol's letter :

" I shall have to keep this, but, of course, you'll have it back eventually."

" Keep it as long as you like."

I said good-bye but, when I reached the door, I turned and said :

" Do you know if Antony Lawless is in town ? "

" I expect he will be to-morrow."

" Thank you."

Directly I reached the street, I remembered he had said there was a reproduction of *Enigma* in one of the papers. That fact made me news. It linked me intimately with a melodramatic murder. I'd have to give my story to a journalist and I decided to give it, exclusively, to Arthur Kent, whom I'd known for years and who had done a good deal for me in one way or another.

I walked on slowly, looking for a telephone call-box.

CHAPTER TWO

ANTONY LAWLESS

YOU CAN know a man for years, meet him frequently, spend weeks in his company, and yet have a premonition that all this is preliminary—that your friendship with him is destined to prove different in kind from any you have known : that, sooner or later, you will reveal yourself to him as you have never revealed yourself to any one.

For years, I have felt like this about Antony Lawless. Even at our first meeting, I had the strange certainty that this man would be intimately associated with a crisis in my life ; consequently every meeting with him—no matter

how trivial—had a relevance far removed from its setting. It was another stride towards a dark destination.

I do not imagine for one moment that Antony is aware of this “destiny element” in our relations, but, for me, it makes our friendship unique—and disturbing. I have had many friends of many nationalities but none who seemed “linked” with a future event.

It is, of course, a fact that on rare occasions you meet a man or a woman—or *see* a man or a woman—and are instantly aware of kinship. Also, and most mysteriously, you are convinced that your meeting with him or her—or your *glimpse* of him or her—is not fortuitous. It was ordained—and it served ends outside your widest guess.

I remember, years ago, standing on a station platform while a famous express pulled out. In the rear coach, an elderly man with a remarkable head leaned from the window. Our eyes met for a second, then there was nothing but the diminishing rattle of the train—and a sense of *loss*.

Some people believe that this sudden awareness of kinship between two strangers is caused by links in former lives, but, be that as it may, I am certain that each of us belongs to a spiritual family and that we recognise our own when we see them—however short the meeting; however brief the glimpse.

But my feeling about Antony was deeper than these intuitive flashes of recognition. I knew from the outset that, sooner or later, all barriers between us would collapse.

All this probably creates the impression that Antony is a mysterious portentous figure, whereas, in fact, he is the most casual-seeming person imaginable. Everything he does appears to be so inevitable that the discovery of his qualities is a gradual process. For instance, eventually you notice that, unlike most men, he has not a repertoire of manners from which he selects the one appropriate to his company. You also become aware of the remarkable fact that he lives wholly in the present. It is an odd experience—in an age determined to blue-print the future—to be with a man who has no idea what he will be doing next, but seems completely aware of what he is doing now.

He is about thirty-three and although his appearance is remarkable, it is the last thing you remember about him. His essential quality eludes any physical description, no

matter how industrious. Like all original people, he sees only essentials in any given situation and acts only in relation to them. A Bohemian has been defined as a person who is loyal to realities whenever they conflict with conventions, but although that may not be true of many Bohemians, it is certainly true of Antony.

He is the youngest child of a distinguished family, the sons of which, for generations, have gone into the services or the church. His father was killed at the Battle of Jutland, his two brothers are in the navy. His mother—still renowned for her beauty and an amusing vagueness about practical affairs—had imagined that Antony would take orders, although he had never given the slightest indication of any such intention.

On coming down from Oxford, he inherited a certain amount of money, every farthing of which he spent wandering about the world, meeting all kinds of people and studying all sorts of subjects. On returning to England, he did various jobs—of brief duration and at irregular intervals—but did not adopt any definite career.

It may be indicative that although he had no technical qualifications, several people were eager to employ him but he consistently refused to accept a permanent position. A job seemed to find him when he needed one, with the result that he never lacked money although I am certain he had none in reserve. For him, money was like manna—it arrived daily, but it could not be kept. That was the Antony Lawless I met some years before the war—in somewhat unusual circumstances. Through a mistake of my agent, a drawing of mine, which I did not want to sell, was sent to an exhibition in London. When I discovered this, it was too late to do anything about it, so I consoled myself with the belief that it would not be sold as it seemed extremely improbable that the peculiar quality which it had for me would be detected by any one else.

It was bought by Antony Lawless. That was the start of our friendship.

What chiefly impressed me was the fact that although he knew hosts of people, of every condition and calling, he remained free essentially. As he was very popular with women, this was a near miracle, but the more I saw of him the more convinced I became that social activity did not involve him—as it does most of us—in loss of freedom.

He possessed a bewildering assortment of gifts. He was a good scholar ; nearly first rate at tennis ; had a genuine flair for originality in art and literature ; was an authority on Villon ; and had an influence over children which seemed like white magic.

These memories of Antony came into my mind as I walked towards his flat on the day after my interview at Scotland Yard. It was a meagre afternoon with low-lying mist and a sky lugubrious as an old umbrella. Everything had dwindled to the ghost of itself. Soon, these shrouded streets would be indecipherable in the anonymity of night.

As I turned into St. James's Street, two muffled figures passed and I heard one say :

“ It'll be over by Christmas.”

They vanished into the mist.

With the exception of the last six months, I had seen little of Antony since the outbreak of war. He joined the army, as a private, in 1939, obtained his commission a year later, then served with the Eighth Army until he was wounded in Italy. He was hit in the shoulder, the result being an almost total loss of power in the right arm. Six months ago, he had been invalided out of the services and was now living in a flat which had been lent him by the colonel of his regiment.

As I turned out of St. James's Street to make a somewhat zig-zag way to his flat, which was over an antique shop at the end of a narrow street, I remembered dropping in on him, three or four months ago, to find that he had just returned to town and was confronted by a formidable mail, chiefly from men overseas. I discovered that most of his time was now spent on the domestic problems of the men in his regiment and, as many of them had been away from England for three or four years, these domestic problems were highly complicated. Wives had disappeared ; or had written asking for a divorce ; or had ceased to write ; or had produced children and were therefore terrified by the prospect of their husbands' return on leave. Antony had become a liaison officer between the unhappy protagonists of these dreary dramas and, miraculously, had effected many reconciliations.

This had been his chief occupation since his return to civilian life but, as he had no domestic help of any kind, the

flat made demands, especially as it contained everything its owner valued. Despite the loss of power in his right arm, Antony managed to perform the necessary domestic tasks, with the exception of bringing up coal from a diminutive yard behind the shop. This was beyond his strength, but the job was done for him each morning by the milkman, who regarded Antony as a being far removed from other customers on his round.

Having made my way through gaping desolation, caused by a flying bomb, I turned a corner and entered the narrow street which led to Antony's flat.

I stopped, then lit a cigarette.

What would Carol's death mean to him? They had been friends—not lovers, friends. Why had this remarkable man given her a thought, or an hour of his time? He had met interesting people all over the world. What attraction could she possibly have had for him?

Then a question of a different kind presented itself. Why had Haimes said—at our interview at Scotland Yard—that he knew Mr. Antony Lawless? Knew him in what connection?

I threw my unfinished cigarette away but, instantly, other questions shot into my mind.

As Carol had been afraid of being alone on that Tuesday night, why didn't she go to Antony? Had he been away? And why had he not telephoned me directly he heard of her death? Haimes knew more about his movements than I did. How had Haimes known that Antony would be back in town to-day?

Had he waited for me to come to him? Perhaps, on the background of her tragic death, it seemed odd that I had never discussed Carol with him. At the time, he had probably regarded my silence as a whim, but—now—it might have a very different significance. And Carol? What had she told him about me?

I walked on, but stopped again when I reached the shop.

I was afraid of this meeting. I was afraid of what he might know—what he might suspect—but, above all, I was afraid of his insight. With others, one had defences: with him, one had none—because he never attacked.

For some moments I hesitated, then ran up to the first floor and pressed the bell.

"Max!"

He took my arm, piloted me along a broad passage, then into a large sitting-room.

"You'd better rest. I'll get tea. It's practically ready."

Directly he had gone, I discovered to my dismay that everything irritated me. In the first place, he had instantly realised that I was not well and this robbed me of initiative. I had intended to ask a dozen questions, but, immediately, I had been relegated to the rôle of semi-invalid. Also, and more mysteriously, his appearance irritated me. Although we had met frequently since his return to civilian life, it was only now that I recognised how little he had changed. The slender vital figure; the almost auburn hair; the wide-set eyes; the sensitive features were unaltered. Everyone was branded by war but Antony seemed unscarred. For some indefinite reason, this irritated me.

So did the room. Formerly, this comfortable sitting-room, with its countless photographs of school teams, regimental and family groups—with its snapshots of friends, houses, horses, dogs, filling all the spare spaces—had proclaimed the super-schoolboy personality of its owner. A cuckoo-clock on the mantelpiece—probably the lone survivor of a memory-treasured nursery—had made that personality attractive. This room contained everything which the colonel—now fighting in Holland—loved. It was not a room, but a shrine. Once, that had seemed rather moving. Now, it seemed ridiculous. It was puerile for a man to be so anchored in the past.

Above all, it irritated me that Antony's first remark had not been about Carol. I felt that, in the same way as he had waited for me to come to him, he was determined that I should be the first to refer to her.

When he returned, carrying a round yellow tray, he said casually :

"By the way, Mervyn Maitland was here when you telephoned. He had to go, but he'll probably come back, because he's very excited—and has no end of questions to ask you. I thought I'd tell you, in case you don't want to run into him just yet."

"I don't mind in the least."

"That's all right, then."

Silence.

I had lied, of course. Actually, the prospect of being cross-examined by Mervyn, with Antony for audience, was annihilating.

"Well!" I exclaimed angrily. "You say nothing about Carol."

"I can't believe she's dead."

"I couldn't at first."

Then, as he said nothing, I added :

"Who do *you* think murdered her?"

"It must have been a lunatic."

"Perhaps it was."

"It must have been."

I put down my cup, then rose and paced the room once or twice. Eventually I stopped near him and said :

"Were you here on Tuesday night?"

"No. I came back early on Wednesday—and saw the news in the midday paper."

"So you've no idea whether Carol tried to see you on Tuesday night?"

"I know she didn't, because Ross slept here on Tuesday—and he did not go out because of the fog. Carol did not come and she did not telephone."

"Perhaps she knew you were away?"

"No, she didn't know."

"Well, perhaps you'll be surprised to hear that she telephoned *me* three times. And she came to my flat at ten o'clock. She spoke to Mrs. Jordan, then wrote a letter, asking me to go round when I came in. She'd never done anything like that before, so it's damned odd she did on Tuesday night."

"Doesn't surprise me."

"It—doesn't?"

"No."

I hesitated, then decided that I did not want to know why he was not surprised, partly because it annoyed me that he had not asked whether I went to see Carol after reading her letter.

"It was damned awkward for me!" I exclaimed. "I had this note from her, written a few hours before her death,

so of course I had to take it to Scotland Yard. I saw Haimes yesterday. Incidentally, he seems to know you."

"Yes, I know Haimes. I went to the Yard directly I saw the news in the paper."

"What on earth for?"

"Because I knew the police would need all the information they could get—and I didn't want them to pester Carol's mother."

"Her—mother?"

Suddenly there was a confused whirring in the clock on the mantelpiece. Tiny doors flew open—a bird's head darted out—emitted "Cuckoo" five times—then the twin doors shut with a click.

This grotesque interruption made me feel quite mad for a minute, but eventually I managed to repeat :

"Her—mother?"

"Yes."

"She never told me she had a mother—or, if she did, I'd entirely forgotten it."

"I thought you'd have read her story in the papers."

I glanced at him. He was standing with one foot on the fender, looking at the fire. Something in his attitude revealed how profoundly Carol's death had affected him.

"I have *not* read her story in the papers! I'm sick to death of the papers! D'you think I like my name being mixed up with all this? My telephone rings all day long. I've spent a lot of time with the Jordans to get away from it—leaving someone in my flat in case there was an important call."

He said nothing, so I went on :

"I'm not going to tell sentimental lies just because she's dead. You know perfectly well that, although she was my mistress, I never discussed her with you or with any one else. You're not a fool, so you must have guessed why. Anyhow, if you didn't, I'll tell you. I loathed my relations with her. My one desire was to break with her. It doesn't matter why that was so. It *was so*."

"I know all that, Max. But I thought that her death—and such a death—would make a difference. I don't know when you saw Carol last, but—"

"Why do you say that?"

"Because I keep seeing her as I last saw her. She was

here a week ago to-day, sitting in your arm-chair. We'd been to a matinée. She stayed on till six, because she wanted to hear that cuckoo-clock again. It always amused her. I can see her, clearly, in your arm-chair, looking up at the clock, waiting."

After a silence I said :

"I lied just now. Death does make a difference. The devil of a difference ! I'm going to find out everything I can about her."

"That's interesting—especially as I've a theory that you'll discover who murdered her."

"I wonder what makes you think that."

"I just feel it. You're a clairvoyant person—uncannily so at times."

"I certainly have my moments. Now I want you to tell me her story. She probably told me some of it, but I didn't listen to half she said."

"It's rather a dramatic story. She was an only child. Her father, Mark Norton, was a poster artist and a very successful one. He was an old-time Bohemian—very generous—always in debt—always borrowing money from the right people and lending it to the wrong ones. His wife idolised him—and continued to idolise him, despite his innumerable infidelities. She was intensely romantic and therefore lived in a world of her own which she imagined was the real one. That's important, as you'll see later. Norton had such a long list of marvellous plans for his daughter that he could never decide which to adopt. Carol adored him."

After a pause, he went on :

"That's how things were before the war. When Carol was about nineteen, Norton collapsed in the street. When they got him to hospital he was dead."

"You didn't know Carol, then, did you ? "

"No—unfortunately. Not till soon after the war. Well, Norton not only did not leave one farthing, but he owed money—no end of money—all round. His friends had lent him too much during his lifetime to do anything for his widow and daughter. Besides, directly the war broke out no one thought of anything else. Carol and her mother had nothing—and her mother was incapable of doing anything except live in the past. She just could not believe that

disaster had come to her. Money had to be got immediately—and Carol had to get it. She became a model."

"I remember she told me something about becoming a model because of the sudden death of her father—but I've heard so many stories from so many models that I stopped listening years ago. Anyhow, there couldn't have been a living in it, with a mother to keep and the war raging."

"Of course not. But it will tell you a good deal about Mrs. Norton that *she* believed Carol made enough to provide for both of them. Anyhow, eventually Mrs. Norton went to live at Hove with a woman who has been devoted to her since schooldays. She did not have to pay rent—and Carol sent her three pounds a week."

"So she had lovers practically from the time of her father's death?"

"Yes. The first man she sat to was Eric Eaves."

"Eric Eaves! I never met him, but I saw some of his work once and that was enough for me."

"She was his model, then he disappeared and I don't think she ever saw him again. She had a lover—and she continued to sit for a few artists."

"I knew it was something like that, but I did not know details. Well, now Carol's dead, Mrs. Norton won't have a shilling."

"It's been arranged."

"I know what that means. *You* are going to make her an allowance. Now, for all sorts of very odd reasons, I am the one to do that. I've more money than I've ever had, so it won't involve the smallest financial sacrifice. That's what's called charity, I believe. I shall make her an allowance, though she need not know that it comes from me. In fact, I'd rather she didn't. Also, I'm going to see her."

"I wouldn't hurry to do that, if I were you."

"Why not?"

"It won't be a pleasant experience. You've had enough shocks lately, one way and another."

"What's unpleasant about it?"

"I've told you that, when her husband died; she could not believe that disaster had come to her. I meant that—literally. I'm certain she thinks she'll wake up one morning to find that her husband's death—and the war—and the raids and everything else—are all part of a fearful dream."

I tell you this because you're the only man I know who could understand it."

"I understand—perfectly. Sometimes it is difficult to know whether something actually happened, or whether it was a dream. Very difficult! But, as Mrs. Norton is incapable of realising facts, how did she stand up to the news of Carol's death?"

"She didn't stand up to it. She doesn't believe it."

"Did you show her the newspapers?"

"They had no effect whatever. She said that no one believes what's in the papers nowadays."

"You mean, she's practically a mad woman?"

"If it weren't for the devotion of the woman she lives with, she'd be put away. That's the position, Max. And you'd better know it—if you're going to see her. As things are, the few people she meets regard her as extremely eccentric."

"I've met plenty of eccentrics."

"I know you have. Still, you may find it an ordeal to be with her. She's like a child who rejects experience—just rejects it, and goes on with her game of make-believe."

"Well, maybe plenty of people will be doing that before long. Plenty have started already. How old is she?"

"About forty-eight."

"I shall go to see her to-morrow. Give me the address, will you?"

He wrote it on a slip of paper, then said:

"I'll let her know you're coming."

"Will she know who I am?"

"She'll know."

There was a long silence.

Eventually I began to wander about the room, as if I were alone, waiting for someone.

Some conversations are overshadowed by what is not said—and this was one of them. I do not know how long I continued to wander about the room, but suddenly everything became blurred. I began to grope my way to the arm-chair, then the room seemed to dissolve, and I knew nothing till I found myself lying on a sofa.

"You're ill, Max! I don't believe in saying that to people, but I say it to you, because you haven't any limits. You never have had. You keep rending yourself to pieces."

"It's nothing. I get a kind of mental black-out sometimes. I've had it, off and on, since the war. It doesn't last long—and it doesn't mean a thing. Still, I'll have a drink, if you've got one."

He mixed a whisky and soda, then said :

"You'll have to pull up. You're on the edge."

"When haven't I been?"

"Listen, Max ! More than any one I've ever known, you have always gone through the world with naked nerves. Well, it can't be done—not with a world war raging. You can't be exposed nowadays ! Surely you, of all people, know that."

After a pause, he went on :

"You're too susceptible to psychic environment. I've not forgotten our stay at Laleham on my first leave. Boyd was living in a cottage down the lane. He was ill, but the doctor did not think he was in any danger. One night you came into my room at about three o'clock and said you were certain Boyd was dead. A few hours later, we heard that Boyd had died in his sleep. Remember ?"

"I remember."

"Well, all that gets me to a question I want to ask."

"It will be the first."

"Did you want me to ask questions ?"

"No."

"Tell me this : You say you had a letter from Carol, on the night she was murdered, asking you to go round and—"

"I didn't go."

"I wasn't going to ask that. What I want to know is : Did you feel peculiar in any way on that Tuesday night ?"

As I did not reply, he added :

"Perhaps you don't remember."

"Yes, I did feel odd."

Then, as he said nothing, I asked :

"Are you—certain—there's nothing else you want to know ?"

"I don't want to know anything else, Max."

I was about to speak when the front-door bell rang.

"That's Mervyn. Now, do listen, Max ! He's very excited—very curious. Do you really think you're up to seeing him ?"

"It's got to happen sometime, so it may as well be now."

"All right. I'll let him in."

Directly he had gone, there was a whirring in the clock on the mantelpiece, the bird's head darted out, then emitted "Cuckoo" six times.

When they came into the room, I was still staring at the arm-chair in which Carol had sat, a week ago, waiting for the cuckoo-clock to strike six.

3

"Good Lord, Max, so you're still alive! I thought you must have committed suicide, as I couldn't find you anywhere and no one had seen you."

He stared at me as if I were an apparition. He was still wearing a heavy overcoat and therefore looked even larger than usual.

"I tell you straight, Max, the whole thing is so damned extraordinary that I half-thought you were the murderer. Damn it all, there we were at the club, talking about the Carol Norton murder, and you never said that you knew her!"

"I wasn't well. You mentioned, more than once, that I looked simply ghastly."

"So you did, God knows! But you didn't say *one word* about her! And when I telephoned you, in the small hours, you still didn't say that you knew her! Then I see in the papers that you've known her for years—and that she was the model for your most famous picture! I telephone your flat—you're not there. I go to the club—you're not there. Damn it, if you *had* murdered her, you couldn't have behaved more oddly!"

Before I could speak, Antony said :

"Listen, Mervyn. Max is ill. He practically fainted just before you came in. He really isn't—"

"Everyone's talking about you! Look at this." Mervyn pulled an illustrated weekly from a capacious pocket. "They've reproduced *Enigma* in colour. And, I tell you, it's a rage."

He handed it to me, then went on :

"I'm only showing it to you. You can't keep it."

"I don't want it," I said, as I gave it back to him.

"I'll get out of this coat, then I'll tell you some things that will thaw you."

He took off his overcoat, folded it carefully, then sat in the arm-chair opposite mine. It was very evident that excitement, or some sudden enthusiasm, had altered Mervyn, because the features had lost their former fixity, and the pale blue eyes under their bushy brows now had an ardour which was a remarkable change from their former apathy.

"This murder is going to make you more famous than ever, Max. Reproductions of *Enigma* will soon be in every shop. I've seen the bloke who prints 'em and he says the demand is terrific. Apparently he can get good quality paper, despite the shortage, so there will soon be thousands on sale."

Again Antony tried to speak, but Mervyn raced on :

"I lunched with a squadron leader to-day. He told me that he put up a reproduction of *Enigma* in the mess—and it was a sensation. So much so, that they decided to take down all the pin-up girls. He said *Enigma* made those half-dressed hussies seem damn·silly. But that's by the way. Wait a minute—and I'll tell you something really most peculiar."

He took out his cigarette case, dropped it, picked it up, took out a cigarette, visited various pockets in search of a match—then threw the cigarette aside.

"Now, *this* really is peculiar."

He remained silent for some moments, leaning forward, his elbows on his knees, his hands clasped.

"It's the strangest thing that's ever happened. But, first, I must tell you something I've never told any one. I'm incurably romantic. Yes, I know!" he exclaimed, as if to prevent interruptions. "I know it's perfectly preposterous for a person like me—at my age and with my figure—to be romantic, but that does not alter the fact that I am and always have been romantic. My trouble has been to find any one to be romantic about. It's a difficulty which is familiar to married people. You *must* have someone to dream about—someone to be unhappy about—someone you'll never meet. That's why people fall in love with film

stars. Everything is so drab nowadays that you *must* have a dream. It's absolutely essential. It's a kind of psychic chewing-gum."

Pause.

"Well—would you believe it?—directly I saw *Enigma*, I knew this was *it*. Most peculiar! I felt I'd found something which I did not know I'd lost."

"Look here, Mervyn! Max really isn't well enough to—"

"It was damned peculiar! I'd look at *Enigma*—and then I'd find that I was thinking about all sorts of things which I'd forgotten ages ago. Things which happened when I was a boy: a children's Christmas party; a snow-shrouded garden; an unknown girl who waved from the window of an old house—thirty-five years ago!"

The telephone bell rang in the next room. Directly Antony had gone to answer it, Mervyn exclaimed:

"You understand, Max! You understand, because you must have seen more in Carol than any one else—miles more—or you couldn't have painted that picture. But tell me this: Why did you call it *Enigma*?"

"Because the expression of some of the features conflicts with that of the others."

"Yes, that's right enough. It's the face of a child who's had a shock. Anyhow, she has the oddest effect on me. I don't care tuppence about things which used to plunge me into suicidal gloom. I'll give you some examples."

He picked up the cigarette, lit it, then went on:

"D'you remember I told you that I was going to live with a girl called Jess? Well, I've just had a note from her saying she's gone off with an American airman. I've no doubt it's only a reconnaissance flight—she'll probably return to base—but the point is that I don't care tuppence whether she does or not."

He evidently expected me to say something, so I asked:

"Hadn't Jess a friend—a girl called Frieda? Perhaps she'd give you a room."

"I dare say she would. But don't forget that Frieda is mad-keen on an Italian prisoner of war called Purgatorio. Misnamed, in my opinion, because he sounds hell to me. But she's crazy about him. Always talking about her

urges ! Very tiresome. Besides, she isn't a woman—she's a secret weapon. If you say one word against Fascism, up she goes into the stratosphere—like a V 2."

"So you don't think you could stand her?"

"I do *not*. Always praising Mussolini and Hitler. I really do not think I could face washing-up every night with the Axis."

Pause.

"I'm free, Max, for the first time in my life. And the proof is that I've had things out with my mother. I told you she's always writing me letters, asking why I'm not chasing the Huns, sword in hand. I had another this morning which started : *Are you my son? That's what I keep asking myself.* Pretty odd question, in view of her pre-natal evidence. Anyhow, I've just written telling her that I was invalidated out of the army—and that I shall ignore all future letters till she writes reasonable ones. So I've cut the umbilical cord—at last!"

Another pause.

"Look here, Max, what was the real reason why you did not mention Carol that day at the club?"

"It was impossible for me to discuss it. That's why."

"Well, in a way, I can understand that. After all, her death must mean much more to you than it means to any one else. I'd go mad if I were in your shoes."

Almost immediately, he went on :

"Antony will be back in a minute and then I'll have to go. I've got to find somewhere to sleep and that may not be easy. It's the devil of a night. What with the dim-out, the frost, and the fog, it looks like a photograph of the future. Still, no good getting depressed. Peace is coming—so we must steel ourselves for sterner ordeals. But tell me this : Can I see you soon ?"

"Whenever you like, but I'm poor company."

"Rubbish ! You're a genius. You've no idea how my stock goes up when people discover that I know you. And now I'm going to tell you something—something important."

He rose, then said with measured emphasis :

"I'm going to find out who murdered Carol."

"You are?"

"Yes. And you're going to help me."

Before I could say anything, Antony came into the room.

When Mervyn had got into his overcoat, with some difficulty, he announced :

"I'm off. Got to find a bed. I may get one at Monty Green's." Then, turning to Antony, he asked : "You know Monty Green?"

Antony did not know him.

"Oh surely! Strangely enough, he married Gwen Bullock. You remember Gwen. Big—beefy—bursting with team-spirit. Whenever you see her, you think of hockey. You must know Monty Green! Vegetarian—conscientious objector—Jehovah's Witness. Lives in a bombed basement in Chelsea."

He adjusted his scarf.

"I suppose you're not coming, Max? If you are, we'll have a drink together."

Before I could reply, Antony said :

"Max is staying here."

"Right! I'm off. Don't bother to see me out."

After the front door had banged behind him, I got up and said :

"I ought to go too. I'll have to get some food and I'd better have an early night, as I'm going to Hove to-morrow."

"You're sleeping here."

"But—"

"You're sleeping here. I'll make up a bed on the sofa, then you'll have the fire for company."

"But you haven't any food."

"There's enough. You're to turn in early, so we mustn't talk. If you try to, I shall read to you. I know you like being read to."

I tried to say something, but he went on :

"No good arguing. That's how it's going to be. I'll get the blankets."

I should not have to grope through dark frost-bound streets, first to the club, then to the flat. I should sleep here in the firelight. I should escape from the spectres which thronged solitude. For a few hours, I was reprieved.

I sank deeper into the arm-chair, then closed my eyes.

Everything was strangely still. As the moments passed, my impressions became confused. It was not Antony in the next room. It was Hilda. I was a child again. A child, gazing into the nursery fire—haunted by the Empty House—dreaming of Fredrika.

CHAPTER THREE

MRS. NORTON

THE TRAIN raced through a landscape rigid with frost. Streams were frozen ; icicles hung from eaves ; even the air seemed solid. Everything was sealed with winter's crest. Only the train shot endlessly on through a static world.

It is an odd fact that the more catastrophic circumstances become, the more unreal they seem. Often, during the worst London raids, I had the extraordinary delusion that this delirium existed only for me—that, any minute, I should wake to find myself in a normal world. But everything which had happened since my “dream” seemed a continuation of it. The talk with Mervyn at the club—the Scotland Yard interview—the hours I spent with Antony—all had the same somnambulistic quality. On each of these occasions, I had watched myself—and I was watching myself now, as I sat in a corner seat of an empty carriage, while the train raced towards Brighton. And I had no doubt whatever that I should watch myself during my meeting with Mrs. Norton.

Till yesterday, I knew nothing of Carol's circumstances, consequently I did not know whether she had any relatives and I certainly did not care. Nothing extraordinary about that, as my chief desire was to break with her and so become free from the fantasies she created. It is terrible suddenly to have your imagination obsessed by one torturing image—to find yourself held in the octopus-grip of habit. What should I know of the real Carol ? The woman I visited in Mitre Street was no more—and no less—than an astral shape in a drug addict's dream. A shape—wholly unreal to sanity : wholly real to madness.

But I assure you, the murdered Carol was very different. She was not a shape. She was a woman. An *unknown* woman. (Many a murderer, staring at his victim, realises that he has killed a stranger.)

Day and night, the dead Carol haunts me. There is no

escape. Always, everywhere, I am alone with her. In the street, at the club, with others, awake or dreaming—I am alone with her.

All physical memories of Carol, except two, have vanished. The first is my vision of her, standing by the screen in Hartley Harrington's studio, when I knew that here was a model for a nude. Never had a subject "shown itself" so uniquely. The second is the vision of her in my "dream," when I stood at the foot of the bed, looking at her without desire—surprised by the beauty of the chestnut hair—amazed by the discovery that it was this child who, again and again, had fired sexual imagination. These memories haunted me and I felt they were connected, although I could find no link between them.

For some minutes I could not think consecutively, then I not only recalled what Antony had said about Carol, but identified myself imaginatively with her life and, as a result, made a remarkable discovery.

Any life that is divided into two drastically divided parts is worlds away from lives which have known variations on only one theme. The dominant fact in Carol's life is that she passed with a stride from pampered security to naked necessity.

It was easy to evoke the setting of the former phase : a successful, Bohemian, extravagant father who idolised her ; an ultra-romantic mother ; the kind of friends such parents would inevitably attract ; leisure ; no problems, except to decide which of her father's many plans was the most alluring. That was the setting and, despite all external evidence to the contrary, it had isolated her.

Then, overnight, all this vanished. Carol confronted necessity.

The more I identified myself with her experience, the more it seemed to resemble mine in essentials. For vastly different reasons, my life—like hers—consisted of two drastically contrasted parts. Her first contact with actuality—like mine—had been brutal in its crudity. She, too, was an only child. Although her parents were utterly unlike mine, the effect of their influence had been to isolate her from the realities of the everyday world—and the effect of my parents' influence had been to isolate me from those realities.

This discovery made me forget my surroundings, but at last I looked at my watch. The train would reach Brighton in a quarter of an hour. Soon, therefore, I should be with the once-romantic Mrs. Norton, now a demented creature, haunting the débris of happiness. I was about to meet her—and I was afraid.

If she had been normal, the prospect of meeting her—even in such circumstances—could have been faced, but Antony had made it clear that she was extremely eccentric. So eccentric that, were it not for the devotion of the woman who sheltered her, Mrs. Norton would be “put away.” I should, therefore, find myself confronted by a being familiar with the frontier dividing two worlds. A being of dual insight.

I’ve met many eccentrics in my day and have always been attracted to them, possibly because they reminded me of childhood. (For years, of course, I’ve realised that my parents were “queer” to an exceptional extent, but happiness is happiness, whatever its setting, and—till I was eight—no child could have been happier.)

All eccentrics, in their varying degrees, consciously or unconsciously, adopt an attitude which sets them at one remove—or at several removes—from the world of facts. Instinctively or deliberately, they create an artificial privacy to which all experience is related and thereby distorted. This artificial privacy is easily attained. You have only to look peculiar enough—your manners and whole way of life have only to reveal contempt for herd-values—and you will soon find yourself outlawed by normal humanity. The inhabitants of an eccentric’s world can usually be counted on the fingers. Once isolation is attained, facts are easily banished and fantasy flourishes. And fantasy enables its addicts to evade the full impact of tragic experience—an impact which, if undeflected, might destroy the last defence of sanity. More often than not, eccentricity is the alternative to madness.

I remember talking about eccentrics, one night in New York, with an American artist, who said he had noticed that the eccentrics he’d met either had a patron or a private income—and what he wanted to know was: What happened to those who had neither? I said I did not think there was much mystery about that. They—were put away.

Again I looked at my watch. Then, as I was getting my hat and stick from the rack, a possibility occurred to me—an alarming one.

Suppose Mrs. Norton resembled Carol.

Although she was mad, she might have Carol's voice—her gestures—the long narrow hands—the lovely feet.

God ! I shouldn't be able to stand that ! Not for a single second !

At last I got out of the carriage and walked slowly down the platform.

2

I had not been to Brighton since 1941 when I spent two days there with a naval officer. Then, everything had a beleaguered air : soldiers manned posts on the front ; the foreshore was mined ; gaps had been blown in the middle of both piers ; concrete blocks and rusty barbed wire disfigured the deserted promenade.

Now there were people wherever you went and the town was gradually reverting to its peace-time aspect, although the gaps still yawned in the piers and some parts of the foreshore were still banned.

After some difficulty, I found the street where she lived. It was on the outskirts of Hove, about a quarter of a mile inland, and consisted of small, stucco-faced, slate-roofed, semi-detached villas—identical in design ; drab in appearance ; destined to decrepitude. The street represented respectability in extremis. Even the attitudes of the cats in the diminutive front gardens expressed profound pessimism regarding the future.

Number 44. This was it !

I felt that it ought to differ from the others, but could detect only resemblances : the same curtains in the same lugubrious windows ; the same garden, divided from its next door replica by the same miniature hedge ; the same chipped steps leading to the same blank front door.

Carol had often climbed those steps !

I stood, staring at them, until I suddenly became certain that I was being watched.

I hurried along the narrow path, up the steps, then pulled the bell.

The door opened immediately.

"You! . . . You . . . At last!"

One fear instantly vanished. She was not in the least like Carol. In fact, it was impossible to believe that this apparition, in a shapeless black dress and white tennis shoes, could possibly be Carol's mother. She had very pale grey eyes which peered here, there, everywhere, as if she were watching the movements of a ghost. The dark hair was streaked with bands of white. Not one of the terribly taut features resembled Carol's—and the voice held no hint of hers.

"There! That room!"

As she did not move, I went into the room indicated, expecting she would follow me, but found myself alone.

It was a fairly large room with narrow windows at either end. Over the mantelpiece hung one of her husband's posters, depicting an exotic lady gazing rapturously at a bottle of scent. The discovery that Mrs. Norton had been the model for this poster was a gradual one. Near it, poised precariously, swayed a reproduction of *Enigma*. Otherwise, there was a remarkable collection of odds and ends, either pinned on the walls or scattered in numerous trays: old dance programmes, paper fans, menus, restaurant souvenirs, picture postcards of continental holiday resorts, snapshots and so on, most of which had a date scrawled on them. There were two photographs of her husband—a large one of a luxuriant Mrs. Norton—and two recent ones of Carol. Near the fireplace, was a big box with a lift-up lid.

Almost touching the fender, was a capacious arm-chair and, opposite it, a much smaller one. By the large chair stood a low round table, littered with oddments and two massive albums. Near the window, leaning against the wall, was a dilapidated sofa on which were a couple of rumpled blankets. The only individual feature about the carpet was a worn track from the door to the end of the sofa—worn, I imagined, by a continual pacing to and fro.

The door opened very slowly—and remained open for a full minute before she appeared.

She still wore the white tennis shoes, but had changed into a closer-fitting black dress which revealed the remarkable frailty of her figure—a frailty difficult to reconcile with the luxuriant Mrs. Norton of the photograph.

"You're nothing but eyes ! Staring—tired—over-worked eyes !"

She came nearer.

"Ah, you're frightened ! You're very frightened."

"I've been ill for months."

She turned aside, then said—as if addressing an invisible witness :

"He's been ill for months."

Then, to me :

"You're frightened. You can't deceive me. I know every sign of fear. Yes, every one."

Silence.

Then, almost in a whisper :

"You believe she's dead—murdered ? You believe that ? *You* ?"

"Yes."

"Do you *know* it ?"

"I only know what every one knows."

Again, she turned aside :

"He only knows what every one knows."

Then, with another abrupt change of tone and manner, she asked :

"Why have you come ?"

"I don't know."

This fatuous reply evidently belonged to her world, because she accepted it as entirely adequate.

"Quite right. One never knows anything. Never ! . . . Perhaps you've come to tell me something."

Instantly her features were lit with almost child-like expectation—which flickered out when I shook my head.

"Come here ! Nearer ! I want to look at you ! She said you were a great artist . . . Are you hiding her ?"

"Of course not."

"He's not hiding her . . . When did you see her last ?"

"About two months ago."

"He saw her about two months ago. He's known her for years—and he never came here till to-day. And he thinks she's dead. And he's not hiding her. And he's frightened. We shall have to think about all this. Think about it very carefully. At night. Yes, at night, when they're all asleep—when great winds roar in from the sea, looking

for something, endlessly, everywhere—crying for something, screaming for something, howling for something . . . Oh my God, my God ! ”

Then, immediately, in a casual conversational tone :

“ You’ve very small feet and hands for a man. Tiny ! ”

Pause.

“ I slept on the sofa this afternoon. So stupid ! I dream if I sleep in the day . . . Do *you* dream ? ”

“ Sometimes.”

“ He dreams sometimes.”

She began to wander about the room, looking at things as if she had never seen them before. After a long silence, she suddenly asked :

“ Were you her lover ? ”

“ Yes.”

She came closer to me.

“ You loved her. You loved the body I gave her. Wait ! ”

She began to rummage in the big box by the fireplace and eventually produced a pair of baby shoes.

“ The first ! The first she ever wore.”

They had no effect on me whatever and she evidently realis
to me

“ Sit there.” She pointed to the small arm-chair. “ I’ll give you an album to look at. You look at it. And I’ll look at—you.”

When we were seated, she took one of the albums from the round table by her side and handed it to me.

It contained snapshots and photographs of Carol almost from the day of her birth to the night of her death. There were nearly two hundred of them. To turn the leaves was to follow every phase of her development. Carol as a baby—a child—a girl—a woman. At school—at home—on holiday—abroad—in town—in the country—alone—with others. Carol : sad—laughing—serious—lovely. It was unbelievable. Frightening ! *This* was no shape. This was Carol. The unknown Carol.

Again and again, I became so absorbed that I forgot I was being watched by the witch-like woman, crouched in the chair opposite. I entirely forgot her, when I reached the photographs of Carol taken just before her father’s

death. I forgot everything, as I studied the contrast between them and the Carol I had met in Hartley Harrington's studio. For several minutes I gazed at an amazing photograph taken in 1938. There was nothing enigmatic in that face—no bewilderment in the eyes : no compression of the lips. That face was a window—from which her whole being looked out.

At last I shut the album.

“ He's seen them all ! ”

She leaned forward, then said :

“ I'll give you the album.”

“ I don't want it. I won't have it.”

“ He's angry. He loved her. She's dead. And he doesn't want her photographs.”

Then, almost in a whisper :

“ *Why* don't you want them ? ”

“ Because I don't. Why don't *you* want them ? ”

“ I'd like to think of you looking at them. At night—when you can't sleep.”

Silence.

All sorts of thoughts—trivial and terrible—raced round my mind. At one moment, I marvelled at the varying tone of her voice, which seemed different every time she spoke. The next moment, the desire to get away raged through me. But, eventually, I was obsessed by the fear that I should faint.

At last I got up.

“ He's going ! He comes here—doesn't ask a single question—and now he's going.”

I stood, leaning against the table, trying to stop the room from spinning round.

She came over to me.

“ We're alike. D'you know that ? We're alike ! . . . Sometimes, when you're out, you come to a turning and see a notice which says : Private Road.”

Pause.

“ I am a Private Road. And *you* are a Private Road. Every one knows I am. No one thinks you are. That's because you're so clever.”

She held my head with her long narrow hands.

“ So clever ! Such a tired head—through being so clever ! Oh, so tired ! So many people coming and going

along his Private Road—thinking it's a thoroughfare. So many ! So tired ! So clever ! ”

Scarcely knowing what I was doing, I sank into a chair.

“ He's ill ! Heavens ! He's ill ! ”

She ran to the box, started throwing its contents all over the room, but eventually produced a small bottle and a dusty glass.

“ Look ! Brandy ! Such a kind lady gave it to me. Oh, so kind. You've no idea. Trained herself to be kind for years. For years ! ”

She poured out some brandy, then handed me the glass.

“ Thank you.”

“ He's thanking me. S-ssh ! ”

Pause.

“ He's better ! He's beginning to look at things again with his gimlet eyes ! ”

I got up slowly.

She came to me, took the lapel of my coat in her right hand, then said :

“ You're going ? ”

The voice was Carol's ! And the attitude was Carol's ! Again and again, when I was about to leave the flat, Carol had stood like this, looking down, holding my lapel with her right hand.

At last I managed to go into the hall and put on my overcoat. I opened the front door, went slowly down the steps, then along the narrow path. When I reached the gate, I stopped and looked back.

She was standing at the top of the steps. For nearly a minute, we gazed at each other.

As I walked away, I heard the front door shut.

CHAPTER FOUR

HARRY AMBROSE

WHEN I ARRIVED at the flat, my first fear was that Antony would telephone. This possibility alarmed me, because I knew I was incapable of saying one word about Mrs. Norton. I dared not think of her.

I did not bother about food. I mixed a drink, then sank into an arm-chair and tried to outlaw all memories of my visit to Hove. It was useless, of course. Every phase of our meeting—from its first moment to its last—emerged in such detail that it seemed a reality, not a retrospect.

Yet, when I had left this flat a few hours ago, I had believed that I was prepared for anything! It is true that I had been afraid of meeting a madwoman, but, even so, no horror I had imagined was comparable with those encountered in that insane room, where only a ghost could feel at home.

What I dared not remember was her acceptance of me as an inhabitant of *her* world. She had tried to establish terrible liaison between us. But I would not think of that. I dared not think of that.

Only a little less terrifying was her instant suspicion that I had secret knowledge of Carol's death. From the moment she opened the front door till she stood at the top of the steps, watching me at the gate, suspicion had dominated her. Although everything she had said seemed as chaotic as the Bedlam of her moods, nearly every word derived from that suspicion and was relevant in relation to it. Every sentence, every question, was a tentacle writhing towards a secret she sensed and tried to probe.

Two hours must have passed while I lay inert in my arm-chair—the room lit only by a small reading-lamp and the glow of an electric fire—but, eventually, I decided that to-morrow I would give Antony a restricted account of my visit to Hove. I would say nothing of her acceptance of me as an inhabitant of her world, and nothing about her suspicions. I would not tell him that I had looked at those photographs of Carol—while that wraith of a woman watched me, with the concentration of a cat crouched to spring. I'd tell him only generalities, in a tone which would indicate that I did not want to discuss details.

I looked at my watch. Midnight. Everything seemed remarkably still. I listened intently, but could not hear a sound. Then, feeling restless, I went to the window, parted the curtains and looked out, but there was nothing to be seen. For some moments I remained irresolute, unable to decide whether to return to my chair, or to get some food, or go to bed. I stood, listening to the stillness, waiting.

Suddenly there was a shattering explosion, instantly followed by another. The building shook as if it had been hit by a battering ram. Then—a long reverberating roar.

Somewhere, not far away, a V 2 had fallen.

Minutes passed before the air ceased to shudder—and routed silence slowly returned.

My daily woman did not come on Sundays so, soon after ten o'clock, I went to a café for a light breakfast, returning to the flat at about eleven. All I knew was that I could not spend the day alone and, although I must telephone Antony, I knew I could not spend the day with *him*.

I picked up the receiver, dialled his number, then said directly I heard his voice :

"It's Max. Well, I went to Hove yesterday and you were perfectly right—it was an ordeal. No need to go into details, because they only add up to the fact that it *was* an ordeal. One thing's certain : I shan't go again. But there's something I want you to arrange for me. I'm determined to make her an allowance, but it is essential—absolutely essential—that she does not know it comes from me."

"I can easily arrange that."

"Thank you. By the way, there's one thing you didn't tell me about her."

"What's that ? "

"She won't be here much longer. You don't ? But have you looked at her—really looked at her ? "

"I haven't your eyes, Max."

"But, my dear fellow, you can damned nearly see through her ! She's the ghost of the woman whose photograph hangs on the wall. She burns herself up. She's like a blazing torch in a high wind. Anyway, I don't think she'll last long."

After a pause, I added :

"Will you be seeing her soon ? "

"Probably on Wednesday."

"Don't be surprised if you get a grotesque account of my visit. I don't think there's anything else. Except that I hope to see you before long."

"I suppose you're not up to seeing any one to-day ? "

"I don't know that I am. Why ? "

"Harry Ambrose telephoned half an hour ago. He's desperately anxious to see you. You'll find him at the club."

"Right! I'll think about it."

Almost immediately after I had replaced the receiver, Harry telephoned.

He must see me! And he must see me to-day! It was absolutely essential. He would have got in touch with me before this, but he'd been flat out since Wednesday. Would I lunch with him at the club—and go for a walk afterwards?

I said I did not want to lunch at the club, but would meet him at the top of St. James's Street at two-thirty.

"It's damned good of you, Max—at such short notice! But it's important to me—really important."

I put down the receiver, then, having tried to work out why Harry was so insistent, I remembered my first meeting with him, two or three years before the war.

One rainy night in Paris, a man came into a café, frequented chiefly by French people, where I was having a drink at a corner table. I noticed him instantly. He was about thirty-six with frank blue eyes, a resolute chin, and a mouth which had either just stopped smiling or was just going to. Any one could see that he was very male, positive—without problems of any kind. You could not imagine him indecisive, or bored, or lonely. He had the casual confidence of a man who had never been embarrassed in the whole of his life.

"Mind if I sit here?"

"Of course not!"

"Thanks. Never been to this show before. Came in to get out of the rain. Lucky to run into you. Do finish that drink and have another."

He continued to talk, as if we had known each other for years, then—automatically—we went to a restaurant and dined together.

There are a few people—very few—whose activities correspond perfectly with their temperaments. Harry was one of them. He was married and had a daughter and a house in London. And it was necessary for him to be married and have a daughter and a house in London. It was also necessary for him to travel—and he spent nearly half his time wandering about the Continent, buying gay

amusing things in Vienna, Paris, Budapest, and so on, then sold them in London. He made a very good income—and he needed a very good income because he was extremely generous. Harry loved his life. He almost hugged himself when he told me about it. His vital expansive nature needed change, variety, the unexpected, but these would have been vanity and vexation of spirit if he had not had a home, a base, to which to return. He was the strangest mixture of a married man and a bachelor whom I have ever encountered, and circumstances enabled him to play both rôles with zest.

He was abroad when war broke out and some months elapsed before he managed to get back to England. Naturally, his business had disappeared as totally as a burst bubble. He had saved nothing, but apparently this swift reversal of financial fortune did not disturb him. He sold his house, rented a much smaller one, then took a full-time job in the A.R.P. He had considerable organising ability, great courage, and was worshipped by every one. His district was subjected to terrible raids—one of which destroyed his house, killing his wife and daughter. Some months later, he was awarded the George Cross for extraordinary bravery in desperate circumstances.

I met him occasionally at the club, although months sometimes elapsed between one meeting and the next. The only alteration I noticed in him was that he never discussed himself. What he talked about most frequently was the courage, kindness, and humanity of the Londoners whom he now knew so intimately. Harry called them "The host of the humble." It was good to hear him talk of them as he had found them—as, he said, any one would find them who opened his heart to them. It was very good to hear him, for it convinced you that, so long as the host of the humble remains uncorrupted, England will survive—no matter how logically certain her eclipse may seem.

As I got ready to go to St. James's Street, I remembered that there had been a considerable period during which Harry never came to the club. One night, at the bar, several men were saying that they had not seen him for the devil of a time and one of them thought it strange, because his absence coincided with the period when there had not been any raids on London. Harry, therefore, had stayed

away from the club during the time one would have expected him to be there frequently.

I left the flat, walked to Sloane Square, where I waited for a bus. It was extremely cold. The frost-pointed air penetrated clothes and made the skin tingle. A red rayless sun hung in a shroud-like sky. Everything was draped with the melancholy of a London Sunday afternoon. The King's Road was weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable. Its whole aspect defied a bus to appear.

I glanced at my watch. Twenty past two.

At last a taxi, containing four American soldiers and two girls, invaded desolation. I hailed it—and they gave me a lift. They were bound for Piccadilly Circus. On arrival, each of the Americans and I paid the full fare—while the driver whistled : “There'll always be an England.”

2

“Max !”

He took my arm and we began to walk along Piccadilly, but before we had gone fifty yards, he stopped and said :

“I can't talk about her death ! I can't say a word about it. Not one word !”

“You knew Carol ?”

“For years. You'll see why I didn't talk about her. I'm going to tell you things I never expected to tell any one. But you'll understand, and you're the only one who would.”

As we started to walk towards Hyde Park Corner, he said :

“The devil of it is that it starts so long ago. In the old days, Max, we had no end of friends. House always full of 'em. That's probably why I told you nothing about the Nortons before the war. I'd known Mark for years. I knew Carol when she was ten—so that tells you. Anyway, remember I *did* know her when she was ten. It's important, as you'll see later.”

As he seemed to expect me to say something, I asked :

“Wasn't Mark Norton very extravagant ?”

“Was he not ! Difficult to say whether he lent more

or borrowed more, but he certainly borrowed all he could from every one he knew. He owed me a lot of money when he died. Still, if I'd wanted money, Mark would have given me any amount, even if he'd had to borrow to get it."

When we reached Hyde Park Corner, he said :

"Let's go into the park, then we'll walk to Kensington Gardens. You're not in a hurry?"

"Not in the least."

"I'll have to tell the story just as it comes. I'm too upset to do anything else."

After a silence, he went on :

"My people were away when Mark died so suddenly. I was abroad. Soon after his death, the war came and, as you know, I had the devil's own time getting back to England. When I did get back, I had plenty to think about, as I was ruined. Many people we knew had disappeared for one reason or other, Carol and her mother among them. I sold the house, left the district, then the A.R.P. job came along. You hadn't time to think. Then France fell—the bombing started—and the balloon really went up."

After a pause, he went on :

"I'm going to break a vow, Max. One I made long ago. I've got to break it, or I can't tell you the whole story. After what I saw during the first bad raid on London, I vowed that whatever happened to mine or to me, I'd take it—and say nothing. And I've kept that vow—till now."

We walked on in silence till we reached the Round Pond. There were very few people about. Already, the December day was sinking ; the red disc of the sun had vanished.

For some moments, he gazed at the water.

"It will be a heavy frost to-night."

"That's certain."

He turned, looked at me with an odd expression, then took my arm and we walked on.

"Sorry the story has such a build-up, but it would be nothing without its background. So get this : I was alone, absolutely alone, directly I had no raid duties. I'd lost every one and everything belonging to my old life. When people talk about my courage in the raids they forget that I'd nothing to lose. I did not care one damn what happened to me. That's why I was brave."

"Rubbish, Harry ! Courage doesn't come from logic. It's something that wells up in you. Or doesn't well up."

"All right ! Have it your own way, but that's how it seemed to me. Remember, though, that I'm talking now about the time when the raids stopped. They stopped for quite a time—in fact, till the flying bombs started. Well, directly I had nothing to do, I made a lot of discoveries—a hell of a lot !"

"What sort ?"

"The biggest was that you can't be a spectator of a world war."

"Why not ? I've been one for over five years."

"But—but you're all right, Max."

"All right ?"

"Yes. You're free. Most of the problems which haunt other people simply don't exist for you. You have a great gift, and you just don't need the things which most men half kill themselves to get. You're the only man I've ever met who is free."

"Good God ! Sorry I interrupted. So you discovered that you could not be a spectator."

"I certainly did. And the more I looked at things, the less sense I could find in them. The war, for instance. Presumably the reason we went into the war was to prevent Germany becoming dominant in Europe—and the end of it will probably be that *Russia* will be dominant in Europe. Unless, of course, we have a war with her—and plenty of people are talking about that. I could not make head or tail of anything. We fought Fascism in one place—and backed it in another. Every one wanted the war to stop—and every one was scared stiff of peace. There was a lot of talk about peace-loving nations, and class war was raging—or about to rage—in every one of them."

Almost immediately, he went on :

"So I soon gave up international affairs. What I really realised was what had happened to me. Everything and everyone I had loved—had gone. I was alone, in a bed-sitting-room in Pimlico, with nothing to do. Well, one night, feeling at the end of things, I went into a café in Chelsea. It was empty except for a girl at a corner table. Carol ! I damned nearly fainted !"

He lit a cigarette, then said :

"That's the end of the build-up. Now, listen ! It will soon be dark and it's getting colder every minute, so what about going back to my room ? You can have a drink, and I can finish the story."

"Good idea. I've had about enough of this."

Then I added involuntarily :

"You're a damned good fellow, Harry ! "

"You haven't heard the end of the story. Let's go. We can get a bus near here which will take us to Victoria."

Half an hour later, when we were climbing the steep steps of an unseen house, he said :

"The people here have been jolly good to me. I don't know what I'd have done without them."

Then he said, as he opened a door :

"Here you are, Max. Never thought I'd live in a bed-sitting-room. Still, might be worse. It runs the length of the house and the bedroom part is hidden by that partition, thank the Lord ! "

He lit the gas fire, produced a bottle of whisky, about a third full, then asked :

"What are you staring at ? "

"Why the suitcases ? "

"I'm clearing out. Tell you why later. Everything comes to an end : bed-sitting-rooms ; bottles of whisky ; and life. Sit down and smoke a cigarette."

While he searched for soda water, I looked round the room and derived no satisfaction from doing so. The massive Victorian furniture evidently considered that it had come down in the world, and convinced you that you had done the same. On one wall was a coloured print, depicting a ramrod gentleman bowing with immense patronage to an upholstered lady.

"I'm sorry, Max, there's no soda. I should drink it straight."

He sat in the chair opposite mine, then went on :

"Carol—in a Chelsea café ! Did we talk ! Went to her flat and stayed so late that I ended up by sleeping for a couple of hours on the sofa. She was my one link with my old life. D'you wonder we talked ? We'd plenty to remember—and plenty to forget."

"Had she altered a lot ? "

"A lot ! In one way it was tragic, but all the same

I found her more interesting than the pampered Carol had been. Deeper—broader! But she was queer in some ways."

"What sort of ways?"

"She knew to a penny what her father owed at his death. Mark had kept a list of what he owed, but none of what was owing to him. Carol knew the amount to a penny. Not that she had any romantic dreams of repayment, but, after talking about a holiday she'd had abroad, she would say: 'You paid for that trip, Harry.'"

"I suppose you asked how she lived?"

"I did. And she said she was a prostitute. Not on the streets, but a prostitute all the same. She also said it was a reserved occupation. She wasn't melodramatic. She spoke quite casually."

Almost immediately, he added:

"She was proud in the old days—very proud. Not in a cheap way, but she put a value on herself. So it couldn't have been funny to be humiliated as she must have been often enough."

"I don't suppose it was."

"Not that she ever talked about that. And she never talked about the men she knew. Never! I wouldn't have known you knew her if it had not been for *Engima*. All she ever said about you was that she sat for you sometimes. She did talk about Lawless, but everyone knew that he knew her, because he told everyone so."

He put his cigarette out, then said:

"She wouldn't take money from me. I told her I'd find her a job, but she wasn't interested. It meant no end to me to be with her. We met almost every day. I half-forgot she was the Carol I'd known when she was a girl. She was a woman, and women have always meant a hell of a lot to me. And, God knows, she was attractive enough. Maddening!"

"Yes—maddening."

"All the same, nothing was further from my mind than sex. That shows you what the mind's worth. I never thought about it. Not with her. Not with Carol. Well, one night, in her flat, I felt like hell about the war—and what it was going to be like afterwards—and the suffering of poor bastards everywhere. I looked up. There she was,

sitting cross-legged, opposite. The next moment, she was in my arms—with her heart beating against mine."

"That didn't surprise her a lot, did it?"

"Nothing surprised her! Well, I woke at about three in the morning and put on the light by the side of the bed. There she was, asleep. I leaned on my elbow and looked at her. Mark Norton's daughter! *Carol*."

He shot to his feet, pushed the chair aside, then began to pace the room.

"Now, I know what I'm going to say will sound damned stupid. Believe me, I know it! In view of what's going on in the world, what the hell did it matter whether *Carol* was my mistress? Well, it damned well *did* matter—to me! It brought home what this murderous war had done to me more than anything else had ever done. Wait a minute," he shouted, as if I had protested. "I knew what was happening all over Europe—and what was going to happen all over Europe. I knew death and torture were everywhere—and that famine and pestilence came nearer every day. I knew that humanity was being shovelled into the bottomless pit. I knew it. But I didn't realise it. I couldn't realise it. Perhaps I daren't realise it. Anyhow, I *didn't*."

"That's right enough. If you realise it, you go mad."

"It's too big to realise. But it wasn't too big to realise that *Carol*, whom I'd known as a child, was a woman in a flat and that I was sleeping with her. My wretched tuppenny-ha'penny human brain could take *that* in! And it just rammed home what had happened to me—and to the world I had known!"

He stopped near my chair.

"I know, Max, that most people would think I was crazy to carry on like this. Mervyn would, for one. Mervyn—who has affairs in exactly the same way as he smokes cigarettes! Well, I'm *not* Mervyn! I've been through hell about this—through absolute hell!"

Then, before I could say anything:

"I just don't understand people who have little lust affairs which don't mean a thing to them. I've had affairs all my life, but I've never had one—not one—which didn't mean something. I like women. I need them. And they've been generous. And, till this happened, I hadn't a memory which hurt."

"Did Carol know you were having a bad time?"

"She knew, all right."

"And what did she think?"

"She thought I'd got it all wrong. She said the pre-war Harry, and the pre-war Carol, were dead. And there was no good digging in the débris looking for them. She said you don't have one death—you have several. She told me that the life she lived when her father was alive seemed like something she'd read in a half-forgotten book."

Then he added, almost to himself :

"Anyhow, I asked her to marry me."

"You asked her to—marry you?"

"Yes. She wouldn't, of course. But I did ask her."

He went back to his chair, sat down, then said :

"You don't know how decent she was to me. Awfully decent! And—ever since her death—I keep discovering things about her."

"What sort of things?"

"Oh, I don't know! I used to think she was unselfish. I was wrong. She hadn't a self—and that's different. Then she wouldn't let me worry. She had all kinds of ways of pulling me out of it. Anyway, I couldn't get on without her, and that's all there was to it. Her companionship became everything to me."

After a pause, he went on :

"We often woke in the night and talked for hours. I reminded her how, when she was fourteen, she had to stay in bed for a fortnight and live on slops. I went to see her nearly every day and used to plan outings we'd do when she was well again. When she was allowed to have her first poached egg on toast, I took it up to her room on a tray. I'd forgotten about the poached egg, but she reminded me."

Then, suddenly :

"Christ, Max! I keep seeing her body—with a knife in her heart."

"So do I."

"Do you think a lunatic killed her?"

"That's Antony's theory."

"Yes, but what do *you* think?"

"I expect it was a lunatic."

"Well, she certainly knew a pretty mixed crowd—café pick-ups, dancers in cheap night-clubs, and some down-and-outs. I don't think she had many lovers—and Lawless certainly wasn't one of them."

He began to talk about Lawless, but, although it was evident that he liked him, it was also evident that he did not regard him as a very remarkable person.

Suddenly he said :

"I went to the police, of course. Saw a fellow called Haimes."

"I saw Haimes. I should think he's pretty good at his job."

"D'you know, it's odd, but I keep going over what I did on the night she was murdered. There was a fog, so I stayed in—and was damned miserable. What were you doing that night?"

"I didn't get in till eleven, then I went to bed."

There was a long silence. He filled a pipe mechanically while he stared at the fire.

At last he said :

"I'm glad I'm clearing out."

"Where are you going?"

"Antwerp."

"When?"

"To-morrow. I couldn't stay in London—not now. You know they're getting flying bombs in Antwerp, so they want people with experience to go over. I believe some A.A. units have gone. Anyway, I said I'd go, and the sooner the better. I'm told the whole place reeks of brick dust, but I don't mind that. And the only relaxation will be cinemas showing old films, but I don't mind that either. I couldn't stay here. That's certain."

"Well, I wish you luck. I'd better go, Harry. You've plenty to do. But before I go, tell me this : Have you seen Mrs. Norton since Carol's death?"

"Ah, now I'll tell you something ! We were talking about courage in the park. I may have some physical courage, but I've no mental courage. Just none ! And the proof is that I could no more face Mrs. Norton than jump over the moon. Anything to do with madness terrifies me. Mervyn is as much as I can stand in the mad way. I saw Mrs. Norton about two years ago. That was enough for

me. What she must be like now, I daren't think. Have you seen her?"

"Yes. Yesterday."

"God! You're the one to have the George Cross. What was she like?"

"Pretty terrifying."

"I'll bet she was!"

Then I saw myself leap to my feet—and heard myself shout:

"I can't get her out of my mind! I can't, I tell you! I—can't."

"Into that chair! Quick! You're having the rest of the whisky. Don't argue! You're having it. God, Max! You'll have to take a devil of a pull on yourself! You can't explode like that."

"It's nothing, Harry. I've been ill lately—and my nerves have gone to hell."

"They always were too taut, I was wrong when I said in the park that I think you're all right. What I mean, was that, at times, you're freer than any man I've ever known, but that's probably because you're only half in this world."

After a silence, he went on:

"It's a damned funny thing, but I read something in a book last night which—God knows why!—made me think of you."

"What was it?"

"Wait a minute."

He went into the bedroom, returning almost immediately with a book in his hand.

"Now, listen to this."

He sat on the arm of my chair, then read:

"Just as there are birds which sense the coming of nature's revolutions, such as storm or floods, so there are men who feel in advance the coming of social revolutions. Such creatures at such times are paralysed and distraught to the depths of their being."

"God knows why, Max, but that made me think of you."

"That's very odd. Years after my father's death, I found that passage—heavily marked—in one of his books."

"I believe your real trouble is that you gamble with yourself."

"And lose. I must go, Harry."

"But are you all right?"

"I'm all right."

When I'd put on my overcoat and we were standing in the hall, I felt that I'd left something, or had something to tell him, but, as I could think of nothing, I shook his hand and said :

"Look after yourself. If you want somewhere to sleep when you get back, come to me."

"That's good of you. And I may have to. They offered to keep this room for me, but that wouldn't be fair—with people sleeping in shelters because they've nowhere to live."

"I say, again, you're a damned good fellow."

"Glad you still think so. Now, *you're* the one to look after yourself. By the way, I never write letters, but I'll be back soon."

That was the last time I saw him.

About a month later, I heard he had been in an Antwerp cinema when it was hit by a flying bomb. Harry was killed instantly. With about eight hundred others.

CHAPTER FIVE

FORTY-EIGHT HOURS

ALMOST IMMEDIATELY after leaving Harry, I discovered that I was exhausted. With many people, exhaustion seems to be the end-term of a process during which they are increasingly aware of fatigue, but, with me, it comes unheralded. And that was how it came now—suddenly, overwhelmingly—when I found myself in the Pimlico streets.

I've no clear recollection of returning to the flat. All I remember is that, on arrival, I flung off my clothes, fell into bed, and knew nothing till I became mistily aware that it was day—but, almost immediately, oblivion reclaimed me and, when I woke, darkness had come and all was still.

For an indefinite period I lay motionless, feeling as if I had made an arduous return from a region remote and

perilous. And this feeling persisted, although I forced myself to get up, have a drink, and smoke a cigarette.

It is probable that exhaustion, by reducing physical vitality to a minimum, so enfeebles your hold on the actual world that you become as defenceless to astral assault as a drunkard, but, whatever the explanation, it is certain that although I was now fully awake, this flat and everything in it seemed unsubstantial as a nearly forgotten dream.

All sorts of disparate thoughts roamed through my mind as I sat crouched over the electric fire. . . . The daily woman did not turn up yesterday. . . . The Sunday papers had been full of the Chelsea murder. . . . I shouldn't be able to be alone. . . . Harry had asked Carol to marry him. . . . She had looked like a child when I stood at the foot of her bed in my "dream". . . . Mrs. Norton accepted me as an inhabitant of her world. . . . I shouldn't be able to be alone. . . .

At last I looked at my watch. It would soon be dawn. I had no plans of any kind. What a vast void of time a day can seem! Then I discovered that, having slept for nearly thirty hours, my time-sense had become so distorted that I did not know which day it was. Eventually, I remembered that I had met Harry on Sunday—I had slept all Monday—so to-day must be Tuesday. Yes, Tuesday.

I left the flat at twelve o'clock, having decided to lunch at a French restaurant in Soho. Although I did not want to be alone, I knew that if I went to the club I should be a target for endless questions about Carol—and I was not nearly certain enough of myself to endure that ordeal. Nothing demands more will than the wearing of a mask.

The air was grey with frost; a gloomy sky was heavy with snow. As I turned out of Shaftesbury Avenue, a man selling papers shouted: "Another Chelsea sensation!" I bought a paper, then read that a Chelsea student had committed suicide. Search was proceeding for a letter which might explain why he had taken his life.

I put the paper into my overcoat pocket, then a new possibility presented itself—and a shattering one.

Suppose that weeks passed and the Chelsea murder remained a mystery! Suppose that a year—two years—passed, and no arrest was made! If that happened, I

should never know with final certainty whether I had killed Carol. The evidence might seem overwhelming, but it was subjective. No objective evidence proved that I had visited Carol's flat on the night of the murder. Nothing belonging to me had been found in her rooms and, so long as objective evidence was lacking, the possibility would remain that the dream had been only a dream.

Why had I assumed that the murderer would be found? Perhaps that student had committed suicide because *he* had killed Carol. That was improbable but not impossible. One thing was certain: if Carol's murderer were not discovered, I should never know whether the dream had been only a dream—or a reflection of fearful reality. . . .

The restaurant was crowded, hopelessly understaffed, but, eventually, the ghost of a meal was served in slow motion. When the black coffee arrived, a cadaverous individual—looking like a vulture at the end of a long fast—hovered near the table, impatiently awaiting my departure. A few minutes later, I found myself on the pavement—with appetite ruined and hunger unpeased.

A few snowflakes fluttered slowly down, as if reluctant to reach the London streets. The sky was an indeterminate blur.

I walked to Piccadilly Circus, then, as anything seemed preferable to the solitude of the flat, I boarded the first bus, went to the front seat on the top deck, and took a sixpenny ticket. When time is an enemy, you employ strange strategems to outwit it and, although a bus ride was not an exhilarating prospect, it would hack two hours out of the afternoon.

Sometimes, for no discoverable reason, ordinary surroundings suddenly assume a new and bewildering aspect. You see them divorced from automatic associations, with the result that their beauty, their mystery, or their squalor confronts you like an apparition. This is what happened to me as the bus went endlessly on through dingy interminable streets. I saw London as if, having been blind from birth, sight had suddenly been given—and realised therefore what a monstrous and grotesque nightmare a world-city is.

A world-city—a stone octopus, with ever-spreading tentacles petrifying more and more of the countryside! A

world-city—a phantasmagoria of squares, churches, monuments, stations, mountainous stores, cinemas, barrack-blocks of flats, teeming tenements, fantastic traffic, slums, suburbs, allotments, rubbish heaps! By day, this demonic world is an inferno of noise. At dead of night, a vast cemetery—where the rich brown earth lies buried under the endless tombstone of the pavement.

In about twenty minutes, the bus reached regions known intimately only by the luckless residents. Trolley buses shot past melancholy shops, derelict houses, filling stations, stucco cinemas, hideous hoardings plastered with inane advertisements. Everything was fog-festooned; everything ached for annihilation.

Dimly-discerned queues stood outside every other shop. Furtive individuals disappeared into tunnels leading to the underworld—from which others emerged to re-behold the fog. Piles of débris, flanked by palsied gaping houses, were sinister reminders of the fact that a V 2 might fall anywhere at any minute. Then, isolated factories emerged, each looking as if it had been tossed on to its site by the random hand of Chance.

Eventually, the conductress appeared and intimated that I was nearing the limit of my sixpenny fare. Before descending I asked the name of the lugubrious region we had reached—and understood her to say we were near Cricklewood.

A minute later I found myself on the curbstone.

Gradually, the mood which I have most reason to fear invaded me. The mood in which *anything* that contrasts violently with the drabness of actuality seems desirable. The mood in which any artificial paradise is preferable to the hell of mean streets. The mood in which one says good-bye to oneself.

Everyone, in his or her degree, knows the necessity for escape from the unreality of sprawling city squalor—which is the reason why there is a public house or a cinema at the corner of every street. Man is an imaginative being. Yes, an imaginative being—no matter how bestially his imagination is debauched by those set in authority over him.

There are many mansions in most of us, for most of us have many moods. And each “mansion” has its own

view, its own occupants, its own memories, its own dreams, its own ghosts. And, above all, its own habits. Directly a mood becomes dominant, you revert to its routine—with the result that your actions become automatic. Nothing creates automatism so surely as servitude to long-established habit. You cannot entertain certain thoughts and certain emotions without those thoughts and emotions acquiring squatters' rights—and the longer they are allowed to remain, the more difficult they become to dislodge.

As I continued to stand on the curbstone, desire for Carol became so dominant that every memory unrelated to it ceased to exist. Then, hypnotised by habit, I walked on in search of a telephone call-box. Having found one, and having started to dial her number—I remembered that she was dead.

And then, and for the first time, I realised that Carol had been deliverance from loneliness. When she was alive, I had loathed the servitude she represented ; I had longed for freedom. Well, now I was free. Free—and afraid. Afraid of these streets—afraid of the hours ahead—afraid of myself.

I do not know how long I stood in that telephone box, trying to decide what to do. If Carol were alive, I should go to her flat. Curtains would be drawn ; the room softly lit ; time would cease to be an enemy. Silence would hold solace—one's heart would not beat alone—beauty would enrich the night.

And then, at last, I recognised how pride had distorted my relations with Carol. It had made me rebel against my need for her. Pride is the most convincing of all liars—but nothing outlaws pride so effectively as misery and, now, I was miserable. Pride had persuaded me that only desire goaded me to Carol, but it was a lie. Often I had spent Sundays at her flat. We stayed in all day and usually she read to me. Sometimes, blended with her voice, I heard echoes of my father's voice reading to me when I was a child—sitting up in bed, wide-eyed, enthralled.

I couldn't stay in these streets any longer ! I'd have to go back to the flat and get through the rest of the day somehow. Henceforward, I should be alone.

Then I thought of something I could do—something I

had not done for years—something that would obliterate the present.

I joined a queue.

Ten minutes later, a bus emerged from obscurity.

When I opened the front door, I saw a crumpled piece of paper on the mat. This was the method of communication used by the daily woman, so I picked up the bulletin, expecting it to record some minor disaster—such as the non-delivery of the microscopic amount of milk to which one is officially entitled.

The message consisted of a single succinct sentence :

Gone to oblige a Polish gent.

To a neutral, this statement might seem to indicate merely temporary desertion, but as I had recently heard oblique remarks to the effect that if you didn't look after yourself, no one else would—that the boot was on the other leg nowadays—and that she was good to them as was good to her—I had no doubt that her departure was permanent. I also had no doubt that it would be useless to look for another daily woman. The marvel was that this one had stayed so long.

I switched on the light. The flat was exactly as I had left it, but it did not worry me to do everything for myself—I had done it before and could do it again.

I went into the sitting-room, carrying the sandwiches which I had bought on my way back. I knew they contained *ersatz* food, but I also knew that if you wait till you are almost starving, you don't bother too much about that. At any rate, these sandwiches made it unnecessary to go again into perishing streets and that was worth some sacrifice.

I drew the curtains, then switched on the electric fire. Nothing could banish the bleak anonymity of Major Black's room, but, when it was lit only by a reading-lamp, merciful obscurity made it seem more intimate. . . .

In the memories of most men is a shrine which they visit when all else is vexation of spirit ; but I doubt if ever a man set forth on a pilgrimage stranger than the one I make when my world is dust and débris.

I went into the hall, then opened the door of a room about as big as a fair-sized cupboard. According to the landlord and the estate agent—both adept in the art of verbal exuberance—Major Black's was a “Three-room flat, kitchen, and bathroom.” This built-in cupboard was the third room—which I had filled with suitcases, trunks, and numerous small odds and ends.

I opened a somewhat battered, label-plastered suitcase, then took out a big black portfolio—containing drawings of Fredrika and the Empty House.

I went back to the sitting-room with the portfolio under my arm, but some minutes passed before I opened it.

No one, living or dead, had seen these drawings. They were uniquely mine. All other possessions had been shared, handled, looked at, lent. These are inviolate. And this fact attains symbolic significance as the years increase and Time tarnishes everything—except the experience enshrined in these drawings.

Once only—for a period tragically brief—imagination is innocent. Once only can it lavish itself with spring-like prodigality. Sooner or later, imagination enters the arena of experience and, if it survive, its wings hide scars. So, for me, and for me only, these drawings are a pilgrimage. A pilgrimage to lost Eden.

I moved the reading-lamp nearer to the arm-chair, then sat down and opened the portfolio.

It is a fact that the drawings of a child, no matter how gifted, nearly always depict only essentials, nevertheless these Fredrika sketches seem to possess a quality more important than that of technical maturity. But it is impossible for me to assess them objectively—their associations are too potent. They resurrect the emotions they represent.

To look at a drawing of the Empty House is to stand again by the rusty gates—to gaze at the nettle-covered drive—at the tangled ivy—at the tentacled creeper. It is to re-live every incident relating to the Empty House from the moment when I saw it for the first time on that marvellous May morning—till I knelt in the porch on that desolate dripping shrouded afternoon.

To look at a drawing of Fredrika is to become the boy who created her. Slender Fredrika, with her dark curly

hair, lit brows, and elfin features ! Fredrika—whom imagination conceived—who still seems more real than any one I have ever known.

Even now, at the age of forty-four—on this December evening in Major Black's flat—it is difficult to believe that all my memories of her relate to an imaginary girl. It is difficult to believe that we never stood together in that wooded valley through which a lazy river runs. Never stood together, gazing at the island in mid-stream where the river divides, in order to double its beauty, and all around are lovely listening trees. Difficult to believe that Fredrika, immortal in memory, exists only in imagination. . . .

At last I put the drawings down and was about to replace the portfolio in the suitcase, when I decided to keep it in the sitting-room. I stowed it in an empty drawer, which I locked, then put the key in my pocket.

I must have spent hours looking at the drawings. It would soon be ten o'clock—and I was almost hungry enough to attack the sandwiches. But a glance at them convinced me that it would be wise to wait till I felt the gnaw of authentic starvation. I lit a cigarette and began to pace slowly up and down the room.

Suddenly I remember that to-day was Tuesday. *Tuesday*. A week ago, I had dreamed my "dream." Yes, exactly a week ago ! There had been a fog. I had come in at about eleven. Before undressing, I'd been haunted by the feeling that there was something I *must* do. Even after I was in bed, this feeling had been so insistent that I got up, parted the curtains, and listened. Then, at about three o'clock, I slept—and dreamed the "dream."

Gradually, the atmosphere of the room altered. I was no longer alone. This impression became so definite that I looked round, but, except the circle of light created by the reading-lamp, the room was in shadow.

I was certain she was near ! Her death linked us—indissolubly. Henceforth, no escape.

Then two things happened simultaneously : the clock struck ten ; and the front door bell rang.

A week ago—at ten o'clock—she had rung that bell ! She had returned and I. . . .

The bell rang again.

Feeling as if I were emerging from a trance, I went into

the hall, then opened the front door—to find Mervyn Maitland, blocking the entrance like a miniature mountain.

3

"I say, Max ! I'm awfully sorry and so on, but could you possibly give me a shake-down for a few nights ? "

"Yes, of course."

"That's marvellous. George Crosses have been given for less."

He moved back a couple of paces, thereby revealing a laundry basket and a cylindrical object, consisting of a number of neatly-rolled blankets held together by straps.

"You are not facing a man, Max—you are confronted by the Housing Problem. Wait one minute, will you ? "

A few moments later, he returned carrying two suitcases, accompanied by a taxi-driver, also carrying two suitcases. Evidently they had been on trek for some time, because the fare, including tip, was two pounds, which Mervyn borrowed from me.

Directly we were alone, he slid into a chair in the hall and closed his eyes. He was still wearing a heavy overcoat, a huge muffler, big fur-lined gloves—and looked like a benevolent giant.

"Since Saturday, I've had the devil's own time trying to find somewhere to live. And, remember, I know a deuce of a lot of people. The first one I tried was Jimmy Lightly. You know him."

"I don't think so."

"Oh, surely ! Little ghost of a man. Voice never broke. No more initiative than a ventriloquist's dummy. You must know Jimmy ! Married Hester Huxtable, but was liberated just before she joined the Commandos."

Pause.

"Anyhow, Jimmy couldn't help. He's living in one room with a Czech, a Pole, and a White Russian. They each have a corner—and call themselves the Four Freedoms. So that was no good. Then I hunted up Launcelot Primrose. I don't suppose you know him."

I said I did not know Launcelot Primrose.

"I thought not. He's a leading light in the lunatic

fringe. Sinister specimen ! Looks like Judas on the dole. Anyway, he wasn't any good either. He's living in an Anderson shelter with an outsize Alsatian hound."

He rose reluctantly, removed his outdoor clothes, then said briskly :

"Now, let's see how we'll manage. Really frightfully kind of you. Incidentally, it's essential for me to be in Chelsea. Tell you why later."

We went into the sitting-room and I was about to explain that the flat had only two decent rooms, when Mervyn became lyrical about an enormous sofa, which I disliked and never used.

After announcing that destiny had led him to this sofa—that they had met in former lives—I managed to tell him that my daily woman had walked out on me.

"Walked out on you ! Ring up Ernie Bevin and tell him to direct her back. We are fighting for Freedom, are we not ? "

I took the crumpled piece of paper from the mantelpiece and handed it to him. He glanced at it, then read aloud :

Gone to oblige a Polish gent.

Pause.

"I say, Max ! You can't stand for that ! You'll have to find this Polish gent and tell him that this woman must give you half her time and give him the other half. She'll have to go from one to the other. You must have a Polish Corridor. You can't leave things as they are. You must draw the Curzon Line somewhere."

I told him there were enough Polish problems, but he could start another if he wanted to.

"Good ! Now, as we'll have to do the housework, the first thing I want to know is this : Is there a draining board ? "

I said I hadn't the slightest idea.

"You don't *know* ! My dear Max, our whole domestic destiny depends on whether there is a draining-board ! You ask any woman. I'd better inspect the kitchen."

We went into the hall, then I opened a door and switched on the light.

Mervyn swept the kitchen with an inventory-taking glance.

"There is a draining-board. It's on the wrong side—

there's nowhere to put the crocks when you've dried them—but there is a draining-board. I see you have to have the light on, day and night. Also that you can only half-open the china cupboard, owing to lack of space. I also note that the hot-water pipes run through the larder. And that the boiler is an experimental model—made about 1850. Still, one must not expect too much. Presumably the rent is only two hundred a year."

"I expect that's about it. The furnished rent is six guineas a week. It would be much more now, of course, but I took this flat for duration."

"You ought to sub-let a room."

"The third room is about the size of a cupboard. No one would take it."

"No one would take it! My dear Max, you don't know the market. Why, Mercia Thistlewaite has let the *hall* of her flat—to a man with a troupe of performing seals."

We went back to the sitting-room, then, having shared the sandwiches, Mervyn unpacked the things needed for the night and made up a bed on the sofa.

Meanwhile, he talked incessantly and wholly about himself: the people he had lived with since leaving the army; his wife; his plans; his family; his mother; his theories about the war; politics—and the probable fate of Mervyn Maitland, and the rest of humanity, in the near future. But although this non-stop commentary was a saga of self—and should therefore have seemed blatant egotism—Mervyn spoke with such detachment that he might have been describing the vicissitudes and views of a character in a book.

Finally, clad in a dazzling dressing-gown and red slippers, he lay full-length on the "bed"—lit a cigarette—then stared at the ceiling.

As he remained silent, I contrasted the flamingo-like figure on the sofa with the pre-war Mervyn—and was somewhat startled by the disparity between them. The pre-war Mervyn had been unstable, extravagant, eccentric—a headache for relatives and friends—but sane enough by standards then prevalent. To-day, however, you were not certain that he was sane, by any standards. You weren't *certain*. Too many of his traits were suspect. For instance, his detachment was suspect, because he might be deliber-

ately viewing himself from a distance as he found a close-up too disturbing. His loquacity was suspect—so was his permanent need for an audience. And you felt that his buffoonery might be a *Punch and Judy* show—manipulated by a Mervyn hidden behind curtains.

“Tell you what irritates me, Max! It’s people who pretend to care one damn about the horrors happening to humanity all over the world, when all they really care about is themselves and those belonging to them. That’s all they can bother about. They *daren’t* bother about others. You know the kind of people I mean. They are told that the Dutch or the Poles or the Chinese are starving and they say it’s ‘awful’—but there’s no awe in the voice. Or they say it’s ‘terrible’—but there’s no terror in the tone. I do it myself, but it really is rather tiresome.”

“Yes, it is tiresome. But what interests me is—what made you callous? You used to be rather an emotional person.”

“It’s the only thing I learned through going to the war.” He made a quick movement with his hands. “No need to go into all the details and, anyhow, it’s all really rather ridiculous.”

Almost immediately, he went on :

“There was a private in our lot. Every one called him Ray. Only nineteen. Kind of person you are grateful to for existing. Awfully popular with officers and men. Well, we were retreating. Lot of shell-fire and so on. Then the Huns must have fired a mortar, or whatever you call it—the result being that I found myself executing a series of highly complicated somersaults in mid-air.”

Pause.

“Eventually I returned to earth—completely stunned. That sort of thing is always happening in war, but you don’t get anything extra for it. Anyway, when I recovered my few faculties, I saw Ray quite near me—and quite dead.”

Again, he made a quick movement with his hands.

“Absolutely ridiculous, of course, but I took that rather badly. In fact, my horizon went black—and stayed black. Then, one day, a sergeant took me in hand. Incidentally, it was the sergeant who saved my life on the beaches.”

“What did he say?”

“He said this : ‘When anything grim happens out

here, you mark it off—quick ! See ? Ray's got his ticket. He's had it. Too bloody bad, but there you are. You mark him off. See ? Else you're for the loony bin.' What d'you think of that, Max ? "

" A fellow who escaped from a concentration camp said much the same. He told me he soon discovered there was one emotion he could not indulge—and that was pity. Pity is a luxury. It is a tip given by the emotionally rich to the emotionally destitute. Your sergeant was right. You daren't remember things nowadays. We've all supped full with horrors. Macbeth though he had, but he was wrong—he'd only had the *hors d'oeuvres*. We've had to ring the curtain down on imagination. It will be interesting to see what we find when the curtain goes up. If anything."

" Well, there it all is," Mervyn said, as he settled more comfortably on the sofa. " I marked Ray off—and everything else. No good doing things by halves. By the way, changing the subject, you're a very different person from the pre-war Max. Almost alarmingly different."

" In what way, exactly ? "

" Can't be exact, my dear fellow ! Quite impossible ! You used to be an ardent spontaneous spirit and now you're —glacial. Still, I'm certain you're white-hot at centre. Lord ! I wish I had a will like yours. But there's no good bothering about that. The thing to do is to go to sleep before night starvation starts."

" Perhaps you're right. But tell me why it's essential for you to be in Chelsea."

" Oh, yes, of course ! I'm doing detective work on the Carol murder—and I'm certain the murderer is in Chelsea. Quite certain ! I really am absolutely in love with Carol."

" Does that affect your relations with other women ? "

" Good heavens, no ! Carol is an ideal—and ideals have no effect whatever on action. But one thing is certain : the police are going to have a job to find the murderer."

" What makes you so sure of that ? "

" She had so many acquaintances—café pick-ups and so on. Oh, by the way, I've made one discovery already. Did you see in the paper that a Chelsea student had committed suicide ? "

" Yes, I saw it."

"He knew Carol. Not well—but he did know her. She may be the murderer."

"He may."

Mervyn stretched hugely, then said :

"But here's something really odd. Antony Lawles thinks *you* will discover the murderer."

"When did he say so?"

"Yesterday. Odd, don't you think?"

"Very. Still, he may be right."

PART III - - DISCOVERIES

CHAPTER ONE

MERVYN

"I SAY, MAX ! I suppose I'd better let people know where I am. What do you think ? "

"Just as well, perhaps."

We had just finished our first meagre breakfast together on a drear dark morning. There had been more snow during the night, so the outside world was a numbed silence.

"Mean a lot of telephone calls, I'm afraid."

"Go ahead. Would you rather be alone ? "

"Good heavens, no ! "

Mervyn crossed to the telephone. He was still wearing sky-blue pyjamas, the flaming dressing-gown and the red slippers—and had just lit his sixth cigarette.

He was evidently given the engaged signal for his first call, because he dialled the operator, then exclaimed :

"Listen, my dear ! I've been given engaged for Klaxon 0001. Well, that's absurd, because Ronnie never gets up till eleven. What ? Try again, though, actually, I'd much rather talk to you. Yes, much rather ! "

Pause.

"That you, Ronnie ? What ! *Left*. When ? Heavens ! I really am terribly sorry to bother you, but has a laundry basket turned up ? The name is Mervyn Maitland. It hasn't ! Well, look here, be an angel—telephone me when it arrives, will you ? You will ! That's really co-operative of you. Thanks awfully. Oh, of course ! You want the number."

Then followed several calls to various laundries. As Mervyn had lived in all parts of London—had sent linen from each address and, as laundries were delivering only monthly, the situation was complicated.

After the tenth call, he replaced the receiver, then lit another cigarette.

"Hopeless, Max ! I'll be arrested for indecency. The

only time I had any satisfaction was when I lived near a laundry. It was on a cash-and-carry basis, and every fortnight I handed in a squalid parcel to the permanent wave behind the counter."

" You brought a laundry basket with you."

" So I did ! Thank heaven you reminded me ! It's not mine. It belongs to a girl called Edna Dell. She must be a jolly little creature. All her things are *chic*."

He dialled a number.

" Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs Laundry ? Listen ! You've a customer called Edna Dell. I've got her laundry by mistake. No, I don't remember where I was living at the time. I get around quite a lot. Would it help if I tell you what the basket contains ? There are six pairs of very *chic*— Oh, it wouldn't help. You'd rather have my name and number."

He replaced the receiver, sighed deeply, then dialled again.

" Is that Mrs. Green of the paper shop ? Good ! Remember me—Mervyn Maitland ? What ? Didn't I pay it ? I'll send you a postal order for seven and six. Take a message for Barnaby Bartleby, will you ? Thanks so much. Say I haven't forgotten the fiver—and tell him I took the towels and soap by mistake. The spam was mine. I gave him two razor blades for it. One unused. Got that ? Splendid ! And will you also tell him that Rhoda is on the rampage—and that Fanny's no good. He'll know what I mean. It really is kind of you."

Pause.

" That's settled the urgent ones. I am glad to say there is a stalemate on the mother front—and only patrol activity in the domestic salient."

He went on to explain that he had informed his wife, Ella, that he was leaving her. He reminded her that their wedding had been arranged by his sadistic mother because she—Ella—was the right type and had money. The democracies were fighting for Freedom—and he proposed to be free.

" I shall miss my youngest daughter, Drina. Only sixteen. Most attractive. My temperament. She has as many moods as there are colours in an Indian shawl. She'll have an interesting life. I told you that one daughter

married to get away from Ella—and another joined the Wrens for the same reason. Before the war, we were a happy English home—with the three girls living in a state of armed neutrality with their fond mama."

After this domestic review, Mervyn rose and began to dress, putting on the thickest things and, finally, a pair of enormous overshoes.

"Now!" he exclaimed briskly. "What about introducing me to the neighbours?"

"The neighbours! I don't know any one in the block—except Mrs. Jordan, who lives opposite, but she's away and has let the flat to friends."

"I suppose you avoid people because you don't want a lot of questions about Carol?"

"Partly."

"D'you know it's a week ago to-day since I ran into you near the Café Royal? You looked like a terrified ghost. Well, I'll have a glance at the larder, then I'll make myself known to the neighbours."

A moment later he called from the kitchen

"D'you want this lard?"

"No. It's been there since D Day."

"What about these tins of sardines?"

"I loathe sardines."

"So do I. They're cousins to pilchards, once removed."

Pause.

"Is this cheese or soap?"

"If it's in the larder, it's cheese."

"It's in the larder, but it looks a slippery customer to me."

He returned, carrying a string bag, containing the lard, several tins of sardines, and the cheese.

"What on earth are you going to do with that stuff?"

"Exhibit it to the neighbours—with a view to barter. Nowadays, you must know every one—try everything—and dispel alarm and despondency."

He looked at me with a queer expression in the pale blue eyes under their bushy brows, then added:

"People like me. They regard me as daft, but not dangerous. That's a half-truth, of course, and they don't know which half is operative. But that's by the way. I'll return shortly and report progress."

He came back in about an hour with a notebook in his

left hand—a thin volume sticking out of his overcoat pocket—and a bulging string bag.

“What in heavens’ name have you been up to?”

“Charming people, Max. Really delightful. I went first to the flat opposite. Mrs. Dalrymple. Such a decorative woman! I told her I was living with you and that I was off to the shops. Could I do anything for her? Such an unpleasant day! She asked me in and gave me some excellent coffee.”

Pause.

“Then I discovered that she has a perverse passion for sardines. So I bartered four tins against a dozen eggs. She gets barrels of eggs from the country. I threw in the lard—to balance the coffee. I am now going to get the fish she’s ordered over the telephone.”

He opened the notebook.

“Here you are! Fish, as ordered, for Mrs. Dalrymple. Also cods’ heads for the cat, if any. That’s wrong! It should read: ‘Cods’ heads, if any, for the cat.’ There certainly is a cat. I saw it. A subtle somnolent creature, with amber eyes.”

Pause.

“Then I went to the first floor and pressed the bell at number 5. Destiny guided me to number 5. The door was opened by a wraith-like figure, in a wizard’s gown, with a mane of wind-blown hair. Mr. Carshalton. And Mr. Carshalton was having a tot of rum—and reading the Book of Revelation.”

Another pause.

“The English are, of course, the most eccentric race in the whole world. Their famous reserve is an attempt to hide that fact. Well, the cultured Mr. Carshalton is quite convinced that he has the authentic key to the symbolism of the Book of Revelation. He gave me this copy to study. He also gave me a tot of rum. I then traded two tins of sardines for a first-rate home-made cake, bristling with sultanas, sent to him by his sister, who lives in the country and runs a beaver farm—also a clinic for boys who have been expelled from our more eminent public schools.”

He produced the notebook again, then read:

“Call at the Eureka Wine Shop and ask if Mr. Carshalton’s rum has come. Say it’s urgent.”

Mervyn tightened his muffler, then announced :

“ I shall be back in about half an hour—always assuming that I do not collect a V 2 en route.”

In two days Mervyn knew every tenant in the block—all the shop assistants in the vicinity—and was in intricate relations with every one of them. To go out with Mervyn was a social event, because he spoke to all and sundry in a manner which implied that they had long been acquainted and, even more extraordinary, every one of them accepted him on that basis. He revealed intimate facts about himself with a nonchalance which suggested total detachment from the trials, tribulations and temptations that assault an immortal spirit on its pilgrimage through a world of illusion. He was especially popular with women and seemed to possess imaginative insight into the domestic difficulties which surrounded them like a barbed-wire entanglement.

“ Fearful destiny to be a woman nowadays—with everything in short supply, except flattery from politicians and press.”

Half of Mervyn’s endless activity was expended in a hunt for food. Experience had endowed him with a formidable technique. Not only was he an expert at barter, but had discovered that a newly-opened restaurant had a brief but blissful period of prodigality before it relapsed into “ pilchards and pickings.”

“ Keep an eye open, Max, for a restaurant just opened by a Greek. They’re the lads ! For a real gorge, there’s nothing like a Greek restaurant that’s just opened.”

Mervyn had also discovered a sandwich bar near Piccadilly Circus which had “ sandwiches with food in them ”, but only from ten to eleven a.m. He explained that it was a tiny place with five high stools at a miniature counter for fortunate customers, while the less favoured stood by the wall opposite—their backs almost touching those of the counter patrons.

“ Same people there every morning. An old bald red-faced man cuts sandwiches endlessly while a jolly blonde woman serves coffee. Behind them, tins of villainous soup, with bilious labels, are ranged in reeling rows. Every one munches. At any moment, a V 2 may join the proceedings—and that fact gives a certain piquancy to the party. You

look round. These may be the people with whom you will cross the Great Divide. You study them more closely. There's a young girl in a snowy overall who comes from a nearby hairdressing establishment to fetch a huge jug of coffee for her fellow toilers. She has tranquil features and tragic eyes. She munches a ham roll. Then there are two women in dungarees. And a rather hard-featured girl with mauve eyes, who arrives each morning with a different soldier boy-friend. It is with these munchers that you may make your *début* in eternity. Somehow, that fact makes them seem strange—and lovable."

Pause.

"However, I'm bound to tell you that the practical effect of the possible arrival of a *V 2* is to make me have an extra sandwich—on the chance that I shan't have to pay for it."

Any one listening to Mervyn would have been convinced of his spontaneity, but the very fact that he seemed to reveal every thought and every emotion was suspicious. Some people exhibit much in order to hide more. Still, whatever his motives might be, his presence delivered me from lacerating memories of my "dream" and my visit to Mrs. Norton. I had only one fear: that he would depart as suddenly as he had arrived.

The weather remained arctic, consequently we seldom went out at night. This did not worry Mervyn. He said it gave him a chance to catch up with world affairs, so, having heaped a pile of cushions on his sofa-bed, he wrapped himself in a couple of rugs, then studied in turn several newspapers and two or three reviews which he had borrowed from the club.

"Ah well! In a few weeks, all the news in these papers will seem far away. And, two years after peace has been declared, the war will probably be regarded as a Golden Age."

"I hope you're wrong. But you're not wrong about the news. In a few weeks it *will* be misty and far away. That's inevitable, because such a Niagara of events descends on us every hour that yesterday seems like a fading dream. In other words, yesterday has period interest."

Mervyn lit a cigarette.

"The simple fact is, my dear Max, that the world has

become totally incomprehensible to the average person. You can take that from me. I talk to every one. I'm a walking Gallup Poll. Yes, totally incomprehensible. So what is happening is that the average person is now only interested in those things which affect *him*—and in nothing else. That won't suit the politicians. They don't like home affairs. When the going is good, they like to strut on an international background—picking up bouquets. It's odd, by the way, that so many politicians regard themselves as supermen when, actually, they are the victims of collective stupidity. Still, I should be just the same if I were one of them. I should adore to stand in a slowly-moving car, passing through thronged thoroughfares, deafened by the cheers of the deluded. Besides, look at the food politicians get at international conferences ! It makes you hiccup to read the menus."

He sighed deeply, then started to read a heavy-looking review. For ten minutes there was silence.

"I say, Max ! This really is too bad !"

"What's wrong now ?"

"I pick up this ancient and venerable review, expecting to encounter cultural serenities. And what do I find ? An article on Artificial Insemination !"

Pause.

"Artificial Insemination ! I gather that a number of test-tube toddlers have already been born in this delectable island. I refuse to relate certain details where the husband is *not* the donor, because I find them grossly indecent. All I will say is this : if test-tube toddlers increase and multiply, I am convinced that English social snobbery will survive."

"That won't be easy, will it ?"

"Quite easy. About thirty years hence, I can imagine someone like my mother saying : 'Oh, yes ! I think I know who you mean. Wasn't he one of the Berkshire test-tubes ?'"

Mervyn threw the review on to the floor, clasped his hands behind his head, then gazed at the ceiling.

"I say, Max ! Here's a question for you. You said that so much happens every hour that to-day's news soon seems misty and far away. Well, Carol was murdered about ten days ago. Do you think the murder seems misty and far away to the murderer ?"

"It depends on whether he's terrified for his own neck.

If he is, everything will be conditioned by terror—including his time-sense."

"And, if he isn't terrified, he might be—glacial—about the whole thing?"

"It's possible."

"I just wondered."

Pause.

"By the way," he went on, "I want to take you to a sort of café-club where Carol sometimes went. I've been two or three times and met some people who knew her. Shall we go there for a drink before dinner to-morrow?"

"If you like. Where is it?"

"In a turning off Mitre Street. You know the sort of set-up. A few artists—others who want to be mistaken for artists—models and so on. It was at this club that I discovered that the student who committed suicide knew Carol slightly."

The telephone rang and Mervyn became involved in an intricate argument. At last he replaced the receiver.

He parted the curtains, peered out, then announced :

"Looks like Siberia. Absolute snow blizzard."

He returned to the sofa, took a slender volume from his dressing-gown pocket and began to read.

Had his references to Carol's murderer been deliberate? And why did he want me to go to that club off Mitre Street? I hadn't a guess, but one thing was certain : I should not be able to stand sudden references to Carol's murderer. Although I had answered him without hesitation and with no hint of emotion, I knew that—next time—my nerve would not hold.

"What's the time, Max?"

"Nearly nine o'clock."

"D'you want to hear the news?"

"Not particularly."

"Neither do I."

Then, excitedly :

"I tell you what! *I'll* read the news! And what I shall read will be much more relevant to luckless humanity than anything the B.B.C. will dish out."

He sprang up, still holding the slender volume, then—having outlined an imaginary microphone with a movement of his hands—he waited for nine o'clock to strike.

When the last stroke faded, he stepped to the "micro-phone" and announced :

"THIS IS THE B.B.C. HOME SERVICE. Here is the news —read by Mervyn Maitland.

"... And I beheld when he had opened the sixth seal, and lo, there was a great earthquake ; and the sun became black as sackcloth of hair, and the moon became as blood ; and the stars of heaven fell unto the earth, even as a fig tree casteth her untimely figs, when she is shaken of a mighty wind. And the heaven departed as a scroll when it is rolled together ; and every mountain and island were moved out of their places. And the kings of the earth, and the great men, and the rich men, and the chief captains, and the mighty men, and every bondman, and every free man, hid themselves in the dens and in the rocks of the mountains ; and said to the mountains and rocks, Fall on us, and hide us from the face of him that sitteth on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb : for the great day of his wrath is come ; and who shall be able to stand ? . . .

"That is the end of the news."

Apocalyptic silence.

At last Mervyn said :

"I wish I hadn't read that. Once those sentences are uttered, you can't get rid of them. They're still here. They're hanging from the ceiling, like invisible stalactites."

Pause.

"You know, some of Carshalton's interpretation of Revelations is impressive—and some is completely hay-wire. For instance, he says that the stars of heaven which fell to the earth represent goodness and truth in varying degrees. The fact that they fell from their high places indicates a total spiritual black-out. That's all right. But his interpretation of 666—the number of the beast—is not so hot."

"What is his interpretation ? "

"He says 666 is the number of the beast—and the beast is the Big Three. He works it out this way. 6 plus 6 plus 6 equals 18. And 1 plus 8 equals 9. And 3 goes into 9 three times. So 9 is the Big Three. And he also says that when the Big Three meet for the *ninth* time, the *third* world war will break out."

"What did you say to that?"

"I said I thought he'd got something. Then he gave me another tot of rum, which brought glad tidings to many depressed areas in my shivering body."

He talked about Carshalton at some length then I rose and told him I was going to read in bed.

"That reminds me, Max. You used to be surrounded by books, but you haven't got any here."

"I've given up owning things. I belong to three lending libraries—and a good public one. I can lend you a book if you want one."

"No thanks. I'll stick to *Revelations*. I read and read—and understand nothing. Still, it does things to me. I feel like a blind man, wandering through cosmic immensities."

2

Soon after five the next evening, we left the flat to go to the club which Carol used to visit.

Streets, pavements, roofs, were ghostly with frozen snow: a dagger-keen wind struck at every corner. Niggard-light and spectral immobility distorted everything as effectively as if some black magician had waved a wand.

The muffled-up Mervyn, having walked about fifty yards—counting the burst water-pipes—eventually stopped and said:

"Extraordinary thing that, whenever there is a frost in our Island Home, thousands of water-pipes burst. Immediately, no end of people—including amazed Canadians—write to the papers, explaining how easily this could be prevented. But nothing is done. Nothing ever is done in the Plumbers' Paradise. Year after year after year, the pipes continue to burst. The trouble with England is that it contains too many people who continue to exist long after they have ceased to evolve. The phrase is not mine, of course. God knows where I picked it up."

As I turned towards the King's Road, he took my arm and exclaimed:

"No need to go that way! There's a short cut through an alley. Surely you know it?"

"I know it. I thought the snow would be thicker there."

"Never mind ! The sooner we get there, the sooner we get a drink."

It was darker in the alley. Not a light, or a sound, anywhere.

Suddenly, a dog barked.

"God ! What's that ?"

"Only a dog ! Lord, Max, you must be in a hell of a state ! You jumped about a yard."

"This damned place gets on my nerves ! Why the devil can't they have a light !"

"But they haven't had a light anywhere for over five years."

"They could have one now. Light doesn't help a V 2. Anyhow, to hell with them all ! And to hell with their damned dogs too ! Get me out of this place !"

"But we *are* out of it ! There's Mitre Street. You can't let yourself go like that ! I wouldn't dare go over the edge. I'd be afraid of not getting back."

He peered into the gloom, then said :

"I believe there's a policeman outside the door of Carol's place."

"Well, what the hell does it matter if there is ? We're going to that club, aren't we ?"

"Yes, of course. All the same, I'm pretty sure it is a policeman."

Two minutes later, we turned out of Mitre Street and entered deeper obscurity.

The Mirage Club was exactly what I had expected it to be. You went down a few steps into a basement, then through a curtained arch into a long corridor, at the end of which was a door opening on to a low-pitched oblong room with a few tables and an infirm piano in a corner. The dark blue walls were ornamented with chalk drawings ; one of which was a crudely-executed head of Carol. At the far end was a narrow passage leading to a makeshift bar. The place was meagrely lit, and at first glance, seemed empty, until I noticed a man at a small table near the piano, who glanced in our direction, then went on writing in a notebook.

Mervyn went to the bar, eventually returning with two glasses of sherry.

"No whisky—no gin—and less civility."

He looked round, then exclaimed :

" That head of Carol is new ! Wasn't here two days ago. It's extremely bad. Well, this isn't exactly exhilarating. Usually several people here at this time."

" What's it matter ? We can drink this stuff, then go to the club. We'll dine there. I suppose they'll all talk about Carol, but I may as well get it over."

Mervyn said nothing. He was staring at a woman, standing in the doorway. For some moments she hesitated, as if undecided whether to stay or go, then walked slowly to a table near the one at which we were sitting.

A minute later, Mervyn said in a whisper :

" I've got it ! I saw her photograph in the paper. She's the woman who runs the shop under Carol's flat. You remember ! A Polish woman. Gave evidence at the inquest. I'm going to speak to her."

" She won't want to talk to strangers. Probably had a hell of a time since she left Poland. Then gets mixed up with a murder ! Leave her alone, for heaven's sake ! Let's finish this filthy sherry—and go."

" I must speak to her. You wait here."

He crossed to her table. Two minutes later, he went to the bar—returning with a cup of coffee and two anaemic buns which he presented with the suavity of a super head waiter.

Then he came over to me.

" I've told her who you are, Max, and she wants us to join her. She's remarkable—and her English is pretty good."

We went to her table and, as Mervyn made himself responsible for the conversation, I glanced repeatedly at this woman whom Carol had known intimately.

She was between forty-five and fifty and must have been lovely before suffering tamed the proud-set features and robbed the eyes of every expression except one. She moved seldom—made no gestures when she spoke—and although she listened to Mervyn, I doubt if she were exclusively concerned with him.

Many modern people are tragic parodies of their pre-war selves, and this woman was one of them. Had it not been for these murderous years, she would not be in this basement, talking to strangers ; her hair would not be iron-grey ; the features would not have a mask-like

fixity ; expectation would not have died in the dark eyes. But, in the same way as a ship in peril jettisons all superfluities, this woman had shed everything inessential to survival. And she had survived—to haunt herself.

Meanwhile, Mervyn was describing his romantic passion for the dead Carol—asserting that, if he had known her, his turbulent life would have been transformed—that she shone above his darkness like a midnight sun—and that he was determined to find her murderer.

Incidentally, his attitude to this distinguished woman revealed the remarkable plasticity of his temperament. An aristocratic trait was always discernible in Mervyn—even during his descents into buffoonery—but, now, it became dominant. In a dozen delicate ways, he indicated such imaginative appreciation of her circumstances that eventually a degree of intimacy was established between them. To do this, while talking what must have been utter rubbish to her, was a near-miracle.

Finally, he said he was afraid things must have been distressing for her since the murder, and she replied that she had been overwhelmed by applications for Carol's flat. She told an elderly man that the body had not yet been taken away, but he said he did not care tuppence about that. He and his wife had slept in the Tube for six months, and would willingly take a flat in a morgue if they could get one.

She related this in a deep-toned voice which had no hint of criticism. Her attitude implied that humanity no longer possessed the power to surprise or shock her. Things happened—that was all. One did not judge—one watched.

Mervyn lit a cigarette and was about to describe some of his many vicissitudes, when a man came into the room.

“Lord ! That's Marmaduke Murphy ! Someone told me he was dead.”

Not only was the massive Marmaduke alive, but evidently derived immense satisfaction from seeing Mervyn, for, having studied the latter with the air of a champion boxer confronted by a frail opponent, he exclaimed in a resounding voice :

“ Hallo, Mervyn, you old twister ! Got you this time !”
Mervyn rose with alacrity.

“ I'd better talk to Marmaduke alone. Extraordinary

man ! Practically certifiable ! Haven't seen him for five years."

He hurried towards Marmaduke, who was making for the bar.

Directly we were alone, she said :

" Your friend has suffered ? Yes ? "

I told her that Mervyn had been invalided out of the army and that, in my opinion, he was still in a highly nervous state.

" It is what one thinks."

" Please tell me something, Madame. Did you see Carol on the day on which she was murdered ? "

" In the morning, I go to her flat."

" Did she seem normal ? "

" No—not normal. Usually—calm. That morning—no. She walk about the room. She say nothing."

Almost immediately, she added :

" It is a great pity you do not see her that day. To you, she speak. You paint the grand picture. No one know her like you."

After a silence, I asked :

" Did she talk to you about me ? "

" No. Sometimes I say to her : ' Max Arnold, the artist, you see him ? Yes ? ' And she say sometime she see you. But I ask few questions. I see that, to her—how do you say ?—you are the man apart. She proud you paint her picture. So proud ! "

Then she said :

" Your friend, who go to the bar, I see that he suffer. Any one see that he suffer. But you—no ! One do not know. You are like me. We have things we cannot share. Always, we are alone with them—night and day—alone with them. I fond of Carol. Soon, I leave the shop. I forget Carol. One learns to forget. It is the only wisdom."

There was a long silence. At last, I asked if she thought they would find the murderer.

" Who can say ? She know many people. She kind to many people. About herself, she do not bother. And she speak of herself—never. I do not think it easy to find murderer."

A moment later, a somewhat breathless Mervyn returned. He stood by the table, watching Marmaduke Murphy who

was striding towards the door, muttering to himself. Suddenly he stopped, then shouted :

“ Within one week ! Or else——”

Mervyn sank into a chair.

“ Extraordinary man ! His family’s extraordinary too. His daughter recently presented this democratic island with twins. Both black. He imagines that I borrowed ten pounds from him on the day war was declared—just after Chamberlain’s radio speech, and just before the sirens sounded. Simply grotesque, of course ! ”

The room was still deserted, except for the man writing in a notebook ; but, soon, a friend of the Polish lady arrived and we said good-bye.

Directly we found ourselves in icy darkness, Mervyn said :

“ Never get a taxi or bus. Better walk to the Knightsbridge Tube.”

Then he added :

“ How that woman makes a shilling out of that shop, I cannot imagine. But foreigners can make attractive knick-knacks out of nothing. She rather scares me. She has one of those faces which asks nothing of life. That’s the most frightening kind, don’t you think ? ”

“ I’m more frightened by a face that once asked much—and now asks nothing.”

When we were in the Tube on our way to Piccadilly Circus, I said :

“ Do you think Antony Lawless will be at the club ? ”

“ He very seldom is at night. Why ? Do you want to see him ? ”

“ Not particularly.”

Mervyn began to talk about Antony but, although he said he was a “ grand bloke,” it was clear that he did not regard him as really remarkable.

When we reached the club and were shaking the snow from our overcoats and stamping to get our feet warm, Mervyn exclaimed :

“ Hope there’s some food ! If there’s hot-pot, don’t have it. I shan’t be a minute. Just going to the Silence Room to see if there are any reviews worth borrowing.”

A few minutes later, he returned in a state of perturbation.

"I can't stay, Max."

"Why not?"

"Old Plimsoll's here."

"What's wrong with him?"

"He terrifies me. When I look at him, I glimpse my future. I see, as in a map, the end of all."

"But what's the matter with him?"

"He's seventy-seven. Till a few years ago, he was a man of vision—almost a mystic. And now he spends his time walking the streets, looking at young girls. If that could happen to *him*, what will happen to *me*? I'm off! There's a crazy light in his eye—and he keeps shaking his head. I run for my life whenever I see him."

CHAPTER TWO

NOCTURNE

SOON AFTER Mervyn had gone, the hall porter appeared and told me that the club was nearly empty, nevertheless I hesitated for some minutes before going upstairs to the dining-room.

Every day—every hour almost—it not only became more difficult to discuss Carol, but I increasingly resented references to her. It infuriated me that she had become a public topic and therefore a target for the curiosity of fools. How could I chatter with the idle and the indifferent—discuss clues—speculate about the motives of the murderer? How could I tell them that, since her death, Carol was nearer to me—and infinitely more real—than any of them? It was they who seemed ghostly, not she.

I stopped near the entrance to the dining-room. The doors were open and service was restricted to the centre table, lit by a solitary light, the rest of the big oblong room being almost in darkness.

Eight or ten men were dining at the top of the table, two of whom I knew well—Darrell Fergus and Erskine Singleton.

Directly I appeared, there were shouts of "Here he is!" Then several men exclaimed :

" Give us the story, Max ! " But Fergus silenced them by exclaiming :

" Let the man eat ! Let him eat, damn it ! If he can find anything. Don't have the vegetable pie, Max. It's a *hara-kiri* disguised."

I sat opposite Fergus and, while I looked at the menu, separate conversations flickered up, but Singleton and Fergus joined in none of them.

Fergus was about forty-five, half-Irish, and would have been a success if he had had fewer gifts. He had failed brilliantly in many fields and, recently, had become "opposite to humanity," consequently he antagonised many influential people, with the result that he now drifted from one job to the next in almost endless succession. Fergus was sensitive as a seismograph to the convulsions of the demented modern world and lived therefore in a state of perpetual agitation. Every few months he had a solitary drinking bout, from which he emerged looking like a man just returned from a long and a terrible journey. Several of the writers and journalists at the table had a superficial cynicism, derived from too much knowledge of a racket-ridden world, but Fergus was not of them. He knew that he, like most critics of current conditions, was only the disease diagnosing itself—and he rebelled impotently against that knowledge.

It was a ravaged face. All the features, except the eyes, had surrendered unconditionally long ago—but the eyes still waged guerrilla warfare. Everything about him revealed the havoc wrought by endless interior conflict. Fergus was a battlefield and looked like one. Very different from the statuesque Singleton with his fine head ; prominent "waxen" features ; and dark intelligent eyes. Any one could detect the internecine strife in Fergus : no one could guess what was happening behind Singleton's immaculate exterior.

" Before you came, Max, these—" Fergus broke off, swept his companions with a comprehensive glance, then went on : " These choice and master spirits were talking about the general disillusionment which has set in now that peace threatens luckless humanity. Hodgson says it's caused by the discovery that the Atlantic Charter was only a moral hiccup. Carter says it's caused by the fact that

Tory ministers profess enthusiasm for policies to which they are secretly opposed—with the result that they sound about as convincing as a man making love to a woman he loathes. And, Sanders—who, as you know, brandishes the Torch of Freedom in the *Daily Wire*—Sanders says disillusionment is caused by the fact that people have discovered that they have not fought to end power politics, but to inaugurate *total* power politics. Whereas Grimes, the noblest Roman of them all, and the least expensive, asserts that people have discovered that England is going to become either a Soviet suburb—or go on the pay-roll of the United States and become a remittance nation. Of course, every one of these supermen stole their remarks from someone else—and not a single one of them cares a single damn what happens to humanity, so long as he is all right. That's the conversational set-up, Max, and now buy me a drink for the love of God and all his angels."

I bought him a drink, then he said :

"I'm going to ask you a question which I ask everyone. What do *you* think reveals the state of the modern world more clearly than anything else ?"

"I'll soon tell you that," I replied, "because I thought it out some time ago. Nothing reveals the state of the modern world more clearly than the facts that, during the last twenty years, the word *sadism* has entered everyday speech—and the word *remorse* has become obsolete."

Conversation became general. All sorts of guesses and theories about the state of the world shot up like fireworks. Inevitably, references to the war were frequent—and at last Fergus exclaimed in a voice rasping with irritability :

"*The war ! The war !* Are you really so dumb as to think this is *one war* ? There have been about eight. First, we fought for Poland. Every one's forgotten that years ago. Except the Poles. Then we nearly fought for gallant little Finland. We ordered fifty sheepskin coats. Remember ? Then we fought to stop Germany dominating Europe. Then France fell—and we fought for naked survival. England was aflame—and the world watched."

Fergus turned to Singleton.

"That's true, isn't it ?"

"Perfectly true," Singleton replied in a clear incisive tone. "The issue was clear—then."

"After that, we fought to make the world Shaef for democracy. That was a happy time. Then we discovered that we were fighting for the nightmare of nightmares—an all-powerful Russia. So then we fought for zones of influence. Not so hot! Then we decided that we were fighting for democracy—and hoped to God that Russia's definition of that celebrated word was the same as ours. Then we remembered that we'd never defined it. And now we are fighting to make half the world safe for Totalitarianism—and the other half safe for Black Markets."

The man next to me rose, picked up his bill, then said :

"You're a romantic, Fergus. This war is being fought because Germany menaced the established financial system. She didn't let lack of bankers' money stop development when men and materials were available. The state created credit, not the banks—barter was introduced—and so on. Germany challenged Money Power. That's why she is going to be destroyed."

All sorts of arguments developed, but eventually Fergus dominated the table.

"Talk till you're black! You won't alter the fact that everyone is scared stiff of the future. That's new. You remember, Max, that about three years ago people were saying that a new Elizabethan age was coming?"

"Of course I remember! A new Elizabethan age was coming—with Noel Coward for Shakespeare."

Discussion roved from one subject to another, but I ceased to listen. It seemed strange to be with these men in this darkened war-damaged room. Now and again a man called for his bill, then went towards the door, instantly becoming a shadow among shadows : sometimes a newcomer entered, emerging from obscurity like an apparition. Not a sound had come from the snow-covered street. Then, suddenly, from the far distance, came a complicated reverberating roar.

"Well!" Fergus exclaimed, "why d'you stop talking? That's only a V 2. And V 2's are confetti compared with what's coming."

He looked round—like a man half-afraid of seeing a ghost—then shouted to the waiter for a drink.

Some minutes later he leaned forward and said to two men down the table :

" You're talking about planning. But tell me this : Have you ever met the *planners* ? I've interviewed 'em. Now, for real inhumanity—for unbelievable vanity—for absolute swine to their subordinates—give me the planners ! There's a prize bunch of bastards for you ! Anyhow, anyhow, the only thing you can plan satisfactorily is a cemetery —because the dead don't move."

He turned to me, then said, as if we were alone :

" We're brothers, Max. Brothers ! The only difference between us is that you took the high road, and I took the low, but I'll be in—shall we say, Scotland ?—afore 'ee. You don't say much, do you ? Not much. Not about the war—or anything else."

" What's the good of talking about the war ? Something utterly outside any one's guess is happening to humanity. The war is an incident—a tiny incident, in something too tremendous to conceive."

Then—although I did my utmost not to speak another word—I heard myself say :

" But there's one thing. And it's this. The psychic atmosphere is so pestilential—so super-charged with hatred, lust, fear, greed, and the stink of blood—that it's damned nearly impossible to think a decent thought or do a decent act. And now, for Christ's sake, leave me alone ! I've had enough of it all ! More than enough ! "

" Oh, but look here, Max, you must tell us your end of the Carol murder. You've stopped eating now. Give us the story ! "

For the life of me, I don't remember who said that. All I know is that Fergus turned on him and exclaimed :

" Expect Max to know the life-history of every model who's sat for him ? You want copy. Yes, yes, you want copy ! All right ! I'll give you some. And I give it gladly, because I know you won't be able to write it up—and, if you could, your bloody paper wouldn't print it."

This announcement focused everyone's attention exclusively on Fergus. Even Bill, the waiter, came nearer to the table.

" Ask yourselves," Fergus began, " ask yourselves what really happened. One human being killed another. A man stabbed a girl. Never mind why. He'd got it in for her—and he murdered her. And he stood by her bed and saw

what he had done. Get that ! *He saw what he had done.*"

He turned to me.

" That's right, isn't it ? If the murderer stayed in Carol's room for only ten seconds after killing her, he saw what he had done."

" That's certain."

" Well, it's damned refreshing ! Listen ! Ten minutes ago, a V 2 fell. Probably that V 2 was made by forced foreign labour—probably launched by forced foreign labour. The men who launched it will probably never know if it reached England. And they certainly won't know what it did. *They* won't see the dead, the dying, the maimed. Wait ! Possibly our bombers will be over Germany to-night. They'll drop five-ton—ten-ton—bombs. They'll kill hundreds, perhaps thousands—anonimously ! *They* won't see their dead. But the man who murdered Carol knew what he was doing—and saw what he had done. That's refreshing ! It's romantic ! It's a modern Romeo and Juliet."

There was a chorus of comments, exclamations, but—scarcely knowing what I was doing—I rose, then groped towards the door. Before reaching it, someone took my arm, and I heard Singleton say :

" You're coming to my place for a drink."

Before I could reply, Fergus lurched over to us and said :

" Going ? Quite right too ! If I had any damned brains, I'd have gone long ago."

He peered first at Singleton, then at me, as if surprised to find us together, then he said to Singleton :

" Tell you something. I love Max—and I admire you. Yes, by God, I admire you ! You've pulled down all the blinds in your house—and kept 'em down. But all *my* blinds are up. Day and night, they're up—so every black-guard and every fool can stare in."

He made a staccato movement with both hands, then went unsteadily towards the table.

Two minutes later, Singleton and I left the club.

For some moments we walked in silence through icy darkness. The frozen snow was so thick that often we did

not know whether we were on the pavement or in the road. Now and again Singleton flashed a torch in order to discover our whereabouts, but the eerie whiteness obliterating everything made even familiar landmarks difficult to recognise.

Singleton, who was about fifty-six, had been one of my first patrons and, before the war, I met him and his son, Michael, fairly frequently. There were many reasons why this companionship was stimulating, the chief being the remarkable affinity between them. Each had a strain of asceticism—a reverence for quality—and a flair for essentials. Often, of course, there is surface similarity between father and son, usually derived from the dominance of the former ; but the bond between Singleton and Michael was created by membership of the same spiritual family. To be with them, was to become instantly aware of their mutual affection—an affection so deep that it isolated them. Singleton had been a widower for nearly twenty-five years and had no other children.

Michael joined the R.A.F. some months before the war. He died in the Battle of Britain.

As he had served with great distinction, his death was announced over the radio. I happened to be in the club at the time and several men were convinced that Singleton “wouldn’t be able to take this punch.” Incidentally, it was remarkable how every one instinctively recognised the unique relationship between Singleton and his son.

But, the next day, at his usual time, Singleton came to the club. And, every day thereafter, Singleton came to the club, at his usual time. He gave no sign whatsoever of his loss—literally and absolutely none. And, equally remarkable on another level, no one mentioned that loss to him. Friends shook his hand—and left it at that.

There was a club waiter, whom every one called Bill, a red-faced jolly-looking man, who had immense respect for Singleton. Bill was away at the time of Michael’s death, but returned a week later. I was alone in the nearly-deserted dining-room, with Bill in attendance, when Singleton came into the room.

Bill went over to him impulsively, but stopped abruptly before the tall impassive figure, not knowing what to do. For some moments they faced each other—then Singleton held out his hand.

So Fergus had not been wrong when he said that Singleton had pulled down all the blinds in his house and kept them down. One knew nothing of his interior life. Most masks conceal only the face, but Singleton's hid his whole being, consequently one could not guess the nature of the drama enacted behind it—if any.

There was a general belief that he had considerable private means, but the facts known about him were few in number and stark in outline. He was the sole survivor of an old family ; he had travelled widely ; spoke several languages ; had considerable pretensions as an art critic ; and had once possessed a remarkable library. He was an authority on contract law and, since 1939, had given his services to the government. Criminal law was his hobby : international law his “light relaxation.” He lived in a small flat off Piccadilly, having sold his place in Buckinghamshire soon after Michael's death. Every one knew these facts about him—and I doubt if any one could have made a single addition to them.

“We're nearly there, Max.”

After a pause, he added :

“You must look after yourself. The murder of that girl must have been a shock for a man of your temperament. Fergus was wrong when he said that you and he were brothers, but you are alike in some ways.”

“I've often wondered what you make of Fergus.”

“I'm prejudiced, because I like him. He's destroying himself, of course. Still, that's common enough nowadays, but Fergus knows it. Can you imagine him content in any circumstances ?”

“In none.”

“It's from men like Fergus that the new religion will come—for it will seem a new religion. Fergus, himself, will die in the desert, but it is from men like him—men compelled to explore the wilderness of their own being—that the new religion will come. But here we are, and I am not sorry.”

Singleton's flat was on the first floor of a block which had suffered so severely from bomb damage that many of the flats were uninhabitable. It had three rooms and, on former visits, we had always talked in a large sitting-room, but, on this occasion, he opened the door of a small room at the

end of a short passage, then asked me to sit down while he got some brandy.

It was a panelled room, but, although its contents had the quality which characterised everything belonging to Singleton, my attention was instantly claimed by two photographs: one of a woman, so young and so lovely that it was difficult to believe she had been the wife of the Singleton known to me; the other, of Michael in R.A.F. uniform.

The more I studied these photographs, the more remarkable the resemblance between them became, for Michael's features—despite their essentially male characteristics—had the sensitivity of the face half-smiling at him from the wall opposite.

Evidently, this was Singleton's intimate room. The tall bookcase between the windows housed survivors from his library; chairs, table, rugs represented a final selection—a deep-rooted personal preference. Everything here had a special claim on memory. Here he sat, night after night, alone—surrounded by spiritual salvage.

“Sorry to have been so long.”

I felt fairly certain that the half-full bottle of brandy was his last, but knew it would be useless to protest. He sat down in a small arm-chair opposite mine—looked round, as if to make certain that nothing had been moved—then said:

“I get rather tired of club chatter about world conditions. Take those fellows to-night. Except Fergus, they all assumed that standards of judgment still exist.”

“Whereas, actually, they don't?”

“Of course not. It's *sauve qui peut* for humanity nowadays. That's the only operative standard. How could there be any other? Standards belong to the past—and the past has been destroyed. There are no precedents for to-day. When everything is unprecedented, history has come to an end.”

After a pause, he added:

“It would save sentimentalists some anguish if they realised what an immense advance it would be if humanity attained the ethical ideal of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.”

“It would certainly save us being told, with unctuous

emphasis, over the radio, that we are dropping almost nightly *five times* the weight of bombs dropped by the Germans during their heaviest raid over London."

"All that will be child's play, if the war goes on. Fergus was right when he said that V 2's are confetti compared with what's coming. As you doubtless know, a new hierarchy of horrors will soon be unloosed on stunned humanity."

He took a sip of brandy, then said :

"However, we won't bother about that. Didn't you think that Fergus's contrast between the murderer who sees what he has done—and those who kill anonymously—was rather effective ? "

"Very effective. Fergus is one of the few people who realise how callous we've all become as a result of years of total war. To stay sane, we *had* to become callous. But the fact that we *have* become callous has sinister implications—and it will certainly dispel the dreams of many facile reformers."

"That reminds me, Max. Did you hear Nugent Nunn on the radio last night ? You didn't ? Pity ! I'm not talking now about Nunn as a writer. Actually, as a writer, he has only one defect—he is unreadable. But, as a reformer, he mistakes his will-to-power for altruism and, like most reformers, he invents a humanity to fit his formula for regeneration."

He rose, crossed to the table—took a cigarette from a lacquer box—then said :

"Nevertheless, without being absurdly Utopian, I do think it probable that we shall soon all achieve chain-gang equality."

He smoked seldom and, as I watched him light his cigarette with fastidious care, it again occurred to me that everything about this man—especially his conversation—was a mask.

I began to contrast him with Mervyn, and, as a result, I suddenly asked :

"What do you make of Mervyn Maitland ? "

"He's an interesting person. Men have different ways of dealing with shattering experience. Mervyn went to the frontier of insanity. There's no doubt whatever about that. He managed to stay just the right side of the frontier by becoming a buffoon—and by never being alone for a single

second. You've noticed, of course, that he never is alone for a single second. People think Mervyn's a fool, but, in point of fact, he's not one."

"Very far from it. If Mervyn is staging an act, he is an artist—because he never lets up on his performance."

There was a long silence.

He still stood by the table, watching the smoke rising from his cigarette. Various theories occurred to me as I studied the upright figure, the waxen features, the deep intelligent eyes, but the most persistent was the possibility that Singleton could reveal himself to no one—and envied, therefore, men like Fergus and Mervyn who paraded every emotion for general inspection.

At last he returned to his chair.

"I want to discuss this murder, Max. As you know, criminal law is my hobby and certain criminals interest me. I was talking to Haimes of Scotland Yard yesterday. I know him fairly well and have a high opinion of his ability."

"Why does the Carol murder interest you?"

"Because none of the usual motives is apparent. I stress the word, apparent. If there had been violation or robbery, this murder would be common form. But there was neither. Also, this girl seems to have been remarkable in some ways. In fact, the more one reviews all relevant data, the more obscure the case becomes. I do not think the murderer will be easily found."

"Did you tell Haimes that?"

"I said it was my amateur opinion. My real reason for seeing him was that, in my view, an important aspect of the case seems to have received little attention."

"What's that?"

"Carol was killed with a dagger which the murderer found on the mantelpiece in her room. Clearly, therefore, the murder was either wholly unpremeditated—or it was committed by someone with intimate knowledge of Carol's surroundings—someone who, for some reason, decided to use the dagger which he knew was in her room."

"What did Haimes say to that?"

"It had occurred to him—naturally—but I think his main problem is that many persons visited Carol's flat. In fact, so many that—as you know—the door of the flat and the street door were frequently left ajar. Several persons,

therefore, had intimate knowledge of the contents of her rooms."

" Does Haimes think that young student, who committed suicide, is the murderer ? "

" He said little about him, but I gathered there is no evidence one way or the other. On balance, I believe the murder *was* premeditated—and was executed with extreme cunning."

" Did Haimes tell you he had seen me ? "

" No, but I guessed it, of course, because I knew that Carol had written to you a few hours before her death. Everything about this case is mysterious. For instance, Antony Lawless has the illogical theory that you will find the murderer."

" I know he has. He told Mervyn so. Mervyn, too, is determined to find the murderer. You, too, are on his track. And Haimes, of course. So, between us, we ought to get him hanged."

Singleton threw his cigarette into an ash-tray, moved his chair nearer to mine, then said :

" Probably my real interest in this case is derived from the fact that Carol was the model for *Enigma*. I've probably told you before that I'm convinced that *Enigma* is one of the very few nudes which this century has produced. It *is* a nude—not a naked woman. Tell me this : Would you have painted it if you had not met Carol."

" No."

" It's the handling of the paint, my dear fellow. For years now, handling of paint has been ignored—and is, of course, dismissed by those artists who are incapable of it. You remember Gauguin said that, when in doubt about spelling, his handwriting became illegible—and that many inferior artists use a similar stratagem in painting."

He went on to contrast the methods of Old Masters with modern ones. According to Singleton, the Old Masters used less paint, but applied it so skilfully that they obtained what has been called the " in and in look." There were no smears in their work, but a dance of brush strokes. Compared with the Old Masters, modern artists were workmen, not creators. They " give you spectrum-colours, side by side."

He ended by saying :

"As to Surrealism, what would it tell you about Blake if you called him a Surrealist? Or Fuseli, for that matter. But possibly the word is a useful label nowadays for the pseudo-artists who produce mechanised Freudian nightmares."

He discussed Surrealism at length, then asked if I knew a definition of art which had the smallest value.

"I don't say it has the smallest value but, for me, art is the conquest of chaos. Every creative act is the conquest of chaos. As to what you said about nudes, Marcel Bon held that a nude must be a woman who has never known clothes—not one who has taken them off."

"Would you add anything to that?"

"Well—romantically expressed—I'd say that a nude should awake Eden-like innocence in the spectator. Or, if he is incapable of that—and he almost certainly would be—then a nude should evoke Eden-like memories of lost innocence."

We talked for another hour. When I rose to go, Singleton seemed reluctant to let me leave. I felt that he wanted to speak intimately, but was restrained by his habitual reserve. Whether or not this reserve had been created by pride or loneliness—or both, in icy partnership—Singleton had become incapable of revealing himself to any one. His wound bled inwardly. During the whole of his life he had found only one woman and one man with whom he had known companionship. Now, night after night, he sat alone in a panelled room—with their photographs on the walls.

3

Every capital has its unique peculiarity—and London is the city of coincidence.

When I found myself in the dark snow-bound streets, after leaving Singleton, I had no doubt whatever that I should have to grope my way to Chelsea. Everything had stopped running long ago: I passed no one and heard nothing. Then, just as I reached Piccadilly Circus, I found a stationary taxi—the driver of which informed me that he was going home and could take me to Chelsea, but only to Chelsea.

On arrival, and while I was fumbling for the flat key, I realised how totally Mervyn had revolutionised my life. Before he came, I had shared the flat with solitude, but, now, to open the front door was often to encounter adventure.

Mervyn frequently gave a night's lodging to some man or woman whom he had picked up on his nocturnal rambles. Owing to overcrowding, all sorts of people found themselves stranded—especially men and women in the forces—and therefore were glad enough of a roof for the night. Mervyn's hospitality was not elaborate : he put a mattress and a number of blankets in a corner of his room, then wished his guest good night. Already, a colonel, a commando, and a woman sergeant had gladly accepted this accommodation. To each, Mervyn had explained that he could not possibly give up his sofa-bed. He told the sergeant that he would not give up his sofa-bed to the Queen of Sheba—he would not even *share* it with the Queen of Sheba—such was his solicitude for the springs.

It is not surprising therefore that I wondered what would confront me when I went into the sitting-room.

I found Mervyn in pyjamas and dressing-gown, but, ranged on the sofa, were his thickest underwear, a pair of heavy corduroy trousers, three or four pullovers, and a pair of fur-lined gloves.

“ What on earth are you doing, Mervyn ? ”

“ I'll tell you in a minute. You're late. Where have you been ? ”

“ Singleton asked me to his flat for a drink.”

“ Alone ? ”

“ Yes. Why ? ”

“ Terrifying person ! He's one of those people who won't forgive God. I admit it's not easy—but it must be done.”

He took off his dressing-gown and pyjamas—thereby revealing an enormous, but well-proportioned very white body—then said as he pulled on a thick vest :

“ Yes, my dear Max, you must forgive God. No matter what horrors you have endured—you must forgive Him. Against all the evidence, you must assume that the King of the Universe is your friend. I saw that quoted somewhere. But Singleton won't forgive. He's turned himself into an icicle—and defies God to thaw him.”

Pause.

"It's lucky I've got those pants. Actually, they're not mine. They belong to a colonel of about my build. I had one of his vests, but some blackguard stole it."

I watched him for some moments, then asked :

"What did you do this evening?"

"Went back to the Mirage Club. By the way, it used to be called the New World Club, but they decided that the Mirage Club is now more appropriate. Anyhow, I'm certain the murderer will be found there. I'm quite certain—and quite serious."

After he had put on a pre-war flannel shirt, I asked :

"You're still interested in Carol, then?"

"Interested! I'm in love with her! She is to me what the Lady of Thoughts was to the troubadours. I am a romantic. I need unappeasable desires—and perpetual suffering in the search for the unattainable. I am a Tristan who has found a dead Iseult. I have drunk the love-potion over her grave."

Pause.

"The more I look at *Enigma*, the more things I remember from far away and long ago. Such jolly things! October avenues of falling leaves . . . Chestnuts, roasting on the nursery fire . . . the smell of seaweed on a briny beach. It's marvellous! *And* there's no possibility of disillusionment. Believe me, Max, the rapture of frustration is much more exciting than the routine of fulfilment. Of course, absence makes the heart grow fonder! Absence is a spring-board for imagination, whereas, too often, presence poleaxes imagination."

Mervyn put on the colonel's pants, surveyed himself in a mirror with evident satisfaction, then went on :

"Being in love makes me symbolic. Isn't that odd? I am beginning to see Carol as a symbolic figure."

"In what way—exactly?"

"My dear Max, one cannot be symbolic *and* exact! It seems to me that Carol represented emotional life. And she lived in a cul-de-sac. That's superb symbolism, because the emotions have long been banished to a cul-de-sac. All sorts of lonely people visited her. That's good symbolism, because modern people—deadly weary of an inhuman world—sometimes get nostalgic, and *visit* their emotions."

He pulled on the corduroy trousers, then said :

“ Very fortunate I’ve got these. Humphrey Cruikshank stayed with me the week-end war was declared—and left them behind. Nice fellow. Fine figure of a man. Ever since the Fight for Freedom started, he’s been in Brixton Gaol—under 18 B.”

He knotted a green tie, then studied it with a dubious expression. As I watched him, it seemed unbelievable that he had a wife and three children

Suddenly I asked :

“ Any news of Drina ? ”

“ I say, Max ! You really are a most uncanny person ! ”

“ Why ? ”

“ It’s about the tenth time it’s happened ! I’m thinking about someone—and you suddenly gate-crash my thoughts. It’s rather frightening. No, I’ve no news of Drina.”

“ Does your wife ever write ? ”

“ That question shows that I have not given you an adequate idea of Ella. She is mean to a degree that scares misers of international reputation. Since the postage became tuppence-ha’penny in this sceptred island, Ella has not written a single letter. If you write and enclose a stamped addressed envelope, she steams the stamp off. So that doesn’t get you anywhere. But I must tell you that I do not regard Ella as a separate individual. She’s an extension of my mother. She’s a wing built on to a prison.”

Pause.

He picked up a black pullover, gazed at it reminiscently, then said :

“ I borrowed this from Timothy Tansy during the Munich crisis. You remember him. He married Hildegarde Hardcastle—just after she had been drummed-out of the A.T.S. for some dark deed.”

After a silence, I asked :

“ Is it really a fact that you’re never going back to your family ? ”

“ Of course it’s a fact ! Except Drina, who is a darling, I thoroughly dislike my family. I revel in the life I’m living now. I adore chance meetings—odd characters—random backgrounds—and eye-encounters in the streets. It’s exciting when an unknown woman smiles at you. For one moment, you share the world together. And I would

certainly rather breakfast at the Corner House than opposite Ella, who invariably studies the *Financial Times* with the rapturous expression of one reading Holy Writ."

Pause.

He picked up a tweed shooting-coat, then examined it with connoisseur detachment.

"Wonder what happened to the fellow who made this coat. I bought it in 1938—and he wrote to me regularly about it for the next three years. Then, suddenly, silence. Probably bombed out. Anyway, I was wise to get a few decent things. This is no climate for fig leaves—and that's all we shall get soon."

"And now, Mervyn, perhaps you'll tell me why on earth you're dressing up in thick clothes instead of going to bed."

"Quite simple, my dear fellow, quite simple. Frieda telephoned at ten o'clock. Frieda has a crisis. She is certain that her Italian prisoner of war is unfaithful. She has a crisis every three months about that. Goes on like a demented being—shrieks, foams, and curses Churchill. I'm one of the few people who can pacify her. If you can make her laugh, the situation is saved. Frieda is living in a flat near Camden Town. I'm going there now."

"You know that it's black as a pit shaft—snow everywhere—icy—and no chance of a taxi?"

"I shall walk. The word has come to Mervyn Maitland, so M. M. girds up his loins and sets forth."

Pause.

"You see, my dear Max, the Almighty employs a pygmy for a pygmy job. The Almighty knows it would be useless to send word to Mervyn Maitland, telling him to lead His people out of the house of bondage, because the Almighty is well aware that M. M. is an old resident *in* the house of bondage. But the Almighty also knows that even M. M.—even the battered, broken, and slightly mad M. M.—is capable of bringing comfort to a wretched romantic girl, who has the dreary delusion that she is desperately in love with an Italian prisoner of war, called Purgatorio."

"You can talk what nonsense you like, but I think it's very decent of you to go to Camden Town to-night."

"Ah, but don't forget, Frieda's been pretty decent too. She once shared her butter ration with me. Such deeds shine star-like in memory."

He lit a cigarette, then said :

“ You know, Max, I think humanity are a pretty gallant lot, really. I’m not talking about spectacular physical bravery. I mean come-day, go-day courage. Unguessed battles of the spirit in mean rooms ! Fearful affairs ! All-in wrestles with terrible temptations—which pounce on you when you’re trying to open a tin of sardines with a penknife. I tell you, humanity are a pretty gallant lot. Too good, anyway, to be blinded, burned, vapourised by the angelic activities of misapplied science.”

He tied a thick scarf, put on a heavy overcoat and enormous overshoes, then picked up the fur-lined gloves.

“ What a fuss Eustace Ironsides made about lending me these gloves in 1935 ! Well, I’d better go. I’ve got a torch. But what about my identity card ? Better take that. If an enthusiastic policeman sees me muffled up like this, he’ll think I’m a Hero of the Soviet Union—straight from the Steppes.”

Pause.

“ *I must* remember not to say one word against Fascism to Frieda. She’s mad-keen on the Axis. She wears the Swastika embroidered on her pants.”

He went to the door, then turned and said :

“ Oh, by the way ! I’ve just remembered ! That decorative Mrs. Dalrymple took in various things that came for us to-day. She’s put ‘em all in a string bag. I haven’t looked at it, but you’ll find it in the hall.”

A moment later, the front door banged.

I went into the hall, picked up the string bag, then took it into the sitting-room and began to examine its contents.

I found nothing of any interest and was about to leave everything till Mervyn came in, when I noticed a nearly-hidden parcel at the bottom of the bag.

It was a fair size and had the oddest appearance of any parcel ever received by me. Not only had an immense amount of string been used, but there were innumerable knots, each with a heavy blob of sealing-wax. Despite these elaborate precautions, the parcel had not been registered. The whole thing looked so peculiar that I decided it must be a practical joke, especially as it was addressed almost illegibly to “ Mr. Max ”—and there were about twenty ha’penny stamps dotted at random all over the package.

I cut a dozen knots—pulled off various supplementary wrappings—then extracted an album.

The album containing Carol's photographs.

I looked for a letter, but found nothing. I studied the scrawled "Mr. Max"—then noticed that the address had evidently been added by someone else. The postmark was Hove.

Why had that madwoman sent me Carol's photographs?

"I'd like to think of you looking at them. At night—when you can't sleep."

That's what she'd said—and, presumably, that was why she had sent the album. Well, she'd wasted her time, and the postage, because I would not look at the photographs. I would never look at them! Even to think of them was to see a pageant of Carol's life almost from the day of her birth to the night of her death.

I would hide them—forget them!

For some moments I stood irresolute, then locked the album in a drawer—the one containing the Fredrika drawings.

CHAPTER THREE

HAIMES

THREE DAYS later I had a note from Haimes asking me to call, as there were certain matters he wanted to discuss. I immediately telephoned his office and made an appointment for the following day.

I had not looked at a newspaper for some time, but, according to Mervyn, the press still featured the "Chelsea Murder" and every one was discussing whether or not the student who had committed suicide were the murderer. So far as I could discover, the only evidence—one way or the other—were the facts that he had known Carol, and the inquest had not revealed any motive for his suicide which, therefore, remained a mystery.

However, I did not care tuppence what the press were printing, and cared less about my impending interview with Haimes—although I realised that some of my statements at our first meeting had been false. All such con-

siderations seemed irrelevant because, now, more than ever, I was concerned only with Carol. The opinions of others—their suspicions—their power—had no reality. When one's whole being is narrowed to a vital issue, onlookers are forgotten.

During the last three days I had seen little of Mervyn—owing to complications in his many amorous affairs—consequently I had spent much time alone and, as a result, had been compelled to recognise a number of remarkable facts.

The first, and the most ironical, was the extent to which Carol's death had increased my servitude. On the physical level, I discovered that the idea of intimate relations with another woman was repellent, but, this apart, the extraordinary fact fully emerged that, when Carol was alive, I had known periods of freedom, whereas, since her death, every thought and every emotion was dominated by her. I had believed that my dependence was only sexual, but I found, to my increasing astonishment, that memories of those Sundays when she read to me at her flat were far more potent than physical ones. Although, at the time, I had not suspected it for a second, I knew now how much it had meant to be with her—not to talk, simply to be with her—while the gloom of a London Sunday deepened slowly till darkness came.

The dead Carol waved a wand over memory. A magic wand, quickening a second memory—a secret memory—which revealed innumerable incidents long forgotten. Tiny, trifling incidents: an unfamiliar tone in her so-familiar voice; an April change of mood; disappointment, suddenly distorting expectant features; a child-like gesture; an unfinished sentence. Trivialities—each magically evoking a faded hour of a forgotten day.

If I had loved Carol, I could not be more obsessed by her. Everything is transformed into a theme for remembrance. Everything emphasises the lack of her, the need for her. I had dreamed that her death would bring deliverance. She is dead—and I am ringed by an emptiness, echoing and re-echoing her name, until nothing exists but my aching loneliness.

The extent of my obsession was shown by the fact that I almost forgot my appointment with Haimes at Scotland Yard and, when I remembered it, I remained totally unin-

terested in his reasons for wanting to see me. The possibility that he had become suspicious—that he had discovered something which implicated me in Carol's death—did not interest me in the smallest degree, and this indifference persisted when I found myself in his room.

I arrived before twelve o'clock and, as he did not appear till a quarter past, I had time to consider the possibilities of this second meeting, but, nevertheless, I did not explore one of them.

Nothing had altered in Haimes's room. Nothing ever does alter in a government office. A day comes when its occupant departs for ever, and another official sits at his table, but, quite often, even that does not represent change.

At last the door opened and the massive Haimes appeared.

“Sorry to keep you, Mr. Arnold.”

“That's all right. I'm in no hurry.”

He sat at his desk, glanced at a note pinned to the blotting-pad, then offered me a cigarette.

“Well, before I start, anything to tell me?”

“Not much,” I replied. “I expect you know you have some amateur collaborators : Erskine Singleton, and a man called Mervyn Maitland. Incidentally, Antony Lawless thinks that I shall discover the murderer.”

I paused, but, as he said nothing, I went on :

“Perhaps I'd better make one thing clear. I was confused at our last meeting and I told you certain things which, at the time, I thought were true, but, actually, they were not.”

“Such as ?”

“I told you I visited Carol periodically for one purpose—and one only—but, in fact, I often spent whole Sundays at her flat.”

“Odd sort of thing to forget, isn't it ?”

“Very. But I'm an odd sort of person. When she was alive, I resented my dependence on her, so I persuaded myself that her attraction was wholly sexual. I've discovered that it wasn't. However—strange as it will sound to you—it is perfectly true that I knew very little about her circumstances, because I wasn't interested in them—then.”

“But you are now ?”

“Very interested.”

He glanced at a sheet of paper, then said casually :

“ By the way, the man who sold *Enigma* was Frank Phipps. Does the name convey anything to you ? ”

“ Nothing. I didn’t benefit from the sale, so I wasn’t particularly interested. Have you found out who bought *Enigma* ? ”

“ Not yet. Would it surprise you to hear that the person who gave a good price for the picture paid cash for it ? ”

“ Cash ? ”

“ Yes. I’d rather you kept that to yourself, and we might have another word about it later. Are there any questions you’d like to ask me ? ”

“ Only one. Is there any reason to think that the student who committed suicide was the murderer ? ”

“ No evidence. That student was a very sensitive young man and it doesn’t do to be too sensitive nowadays—as you know.”

He put his cigarette in an ash-tray, then leaned back in his chair and gazed at the ceiling.

“ Now, tell me this, Mr. Arnold : Would you say that Carol was a very tidy person ? ”

“ Yes.”

“ Exceptionally tidy ? ”

“ Yes.”

“ So, if you found anything of hers—say, a drawer—in a state of muddle, you’d be surprised.”

“ Very surprised.”

He was about to speak when the telephone bell rang. For some minutes he was engaged in a conversation to which he contributed chiefly monosyllables.

At last he put the receiver down and turned to me.

“ The obvious difficulty in this case—in which we are both so interested for very different reasons—is, of course, that so many people visited Carol’s flat. She was pretty decent to a good many very different types. I’ve learned a lot about her since I saw you last and—”

“ What sort of things ? ”

“ Well, she wasn’t the type you’d expect from her way of life. Not by a long way. She was generous and she helped people who would never be in a position to do anything for her. Incidentally, so far as I can discover, she was intimate only with you and one other man.”

"Was the other man Harry Ambrose—who has just been killed in Antwerp by a flying bomb?"

"That's the man."

"I thought I was the only person in the world who knew that Ambrose and Carol were lovers."

"My main point is that the murderer might be any one of twenty people—or more."

Almost immediately he went on :

"But this is what I want to stress. You may have wondered why I told you that *Enigma* was paid for in cash. And you may have wondered why I asked you whether Carol was an exceptionally tidy person. I'll tell you. Everything in the least exceptional is important in this case. Very important. I want you to let me know immediately if you discover anything which seems unusual. No matter how trifling. It is something trifling which will put us on to the track of the murderer."

He paused, then said slowly :

"If only you'd gone to her flat when you got her letter."

Before I could speak, he went on :

"You said you were confused at our last meeting, so perhaps you were a bit hazy about the letter she wrote you. On the chance that was so, I'll read it to you."

He unlocked a drawer, took out Carol's letter, then read :

Tuesday Night.

Max,

I have telephoned three times, but there was no reply. If you get back to-night and are not too tired, please come and see me.

Why didn't you tell me you've been ill? I've only just heard. You can't have been alone for weeks with only a daily woman to look after you! Why didn't you telephone? Did you think I'd be no good as a nurse? I expect you thought that—but you might have given me a trial.

If you can, do come round. I can't think why, but I've been restless all day and—to-night—I do not want to be alone.

I shall wait up for you.

Do come, if you can.

Carol.

I do not know how long the silence lasted, but eventually he said :

“ Although she says she ‘ can’t think why ’ she was restless, it seems certain that she had a very definite reason for wanting to see you. She may have thought it was a ridiculous reason—so ridiculous that she did not want to write it—but she had one. I’m convinced of that. You told me at our last meeting that she wasn’t nervous in that flat—and she can’t have been, or she wouldn’t have left those doors ajar so frequently. But she *was* nervous that night. She left the doors ajar, because she was certain you’d come. Perhaps she had seen someone on that Tuesday of whom she was afraid. Anyhow, something happened. I’ve no doubt about that.”

I said nothing and at last he added :

“ I’m counting on you to let me know anything which seems peculiar to you. Possibly you’ll remember something.”

“ Possibly. If I do, I’ll let you know.”

I rose and was about to go, when he said :

“ You can take Carol’s letter. I’ve finished with it.”

Nearly a minute passed before I crossed to his desk, picked up the letter—then went slowly out of the room.

CHAPTER FOUR

PRELUDE TO CONFESSION

WHEN I REACHED the antique shop, I came to a standstill. This was the moment for final decision. Until now, I could persuade myself that at any minute I should abandon the insane idea of confessing to Antony Lawless, but, now, the issue was inescapable. Either I should go up to his flat—or I should return to Chelsea.

Some time passed, but I remained on the pavement, looking at the sitting-room windows. I felt certain he was in. Perhaps he had seen me. Perhaps he was standing behind those curtains, wondering why I stayed so long in the frost-grey street.

All sorts of irrelevant thoughts wandered through my mind. The flat had been lent to Antony by the colonel of

his regiment. Perhaps the colonel had returned and was now gazing at the photographs of school teams and regimental groups—at snapshots of relatives, horses, dogs—at the cuckoo-clock on the mantelpiece. Perhaps, at this actual minute, the colonel was looking at these relics of a world which had become almost indistinguishable from a dream.

Then it occurred to me that, even now, I could postpone a final decision. Why had I assumed that, if I went to his flat, I should inevitably confess? Probably, directly I found myself in his presence, the absurdity of confession would instantly become apparent. Perhaps we should talk generalities for half an hour, then I should go back to Chelsea. But one thing was certain: in no circumstances would I discuss my visit to Mrs. Norton, or tell him that she had sent me the album containing Carol's photographs.

I climbed slowly up the rather steep stairs.

The flat door was open and, as I entered the hall, I heard a woman's voice, then Antony's. When I went into the sitting-room, I indicated that they were not to interrupt their conversation, then sat down and lit a cigarette.

I had not seen the woman before. She was about twenty-three, dark, and had an attraction not wholly attributable to physical desirability. They were talking trivialities, yet everything they said, and everything they did, seemed to possess peculiar interest. Sometimes, at a play, you are enthralled by a scene between two characters. There is nothing exceptional about it—it does not contain a single conventional thrill—but, somehow, the characters dower dialogue and action with imaginative magic. You seem to be watching a world where everything is happening for the first time.

Antony and this unknown woman created that effect, consequently I did not mind how long their conversation lasted. I was content to watch and listen, particularly as I became aware of a quality in her which was not easy to define.

She had no affectation, no self-consciousness—none of the pseudo animation which many modern women parade, evidently believing that men find it attractive. She did not say what she thought he would want her to say. She did not pose as an inhabitant of his world. She remained in her own—and was delightfully at home in it.

When she learned my name, she asked if Antony were expecting me, and when I told her I had called on chance, she said it was odd because they had been talking about *Enigma*.

Then she asked :

“ Is it true you don’t know where the picture is ? ”

“ Perfectly true. I do not even know who bought it.”

She left a few moments later and, when Antony returned, I said :

“ You have a strange effect on women. I’ve often noticed it. They don’t stage their modern-woman-act with you.”

“ That’s because I don’t treat them as equals. Sit by the fire, Max. It’s good to see you.”

I sat in an arm-chair, took the cigarette he offered me, then said :

“ Why don’t you treat them as equals ? ”

“ Because they’re not. You can regard them as superiors, or inferiors, but not as equals. Personally, I think they should be regarded as superiors, because they are so plastic that they would soon earn the distinction if they don’t possess it already. Anyhow, it seems to me that men’s outlook on women is entirely conditioned by their outlook on the future. When faith in the future is strong, women are honoured. When it’s weak, they aren’t. Anyway, for me, a meeting with a woman is adventure.”

“ In what way ? ”

“ I’ll put it like this. When you are with a man, you’ve a pretty good idea how he will reach an opinion about you, because you know what he regards as important. But, with a woman, you haven’t a guess. Things wholly trivial to you—movements, gestures, tone of the voice, and so on—will probably be all-important to her. That’s why it’s easier to deceive a man than it is to deceive a woman. You can camouflage yourself when you’re with a man, because you know what he will look for. But you can’t with a woman—because you’ve no idea what she regards as revealing.”

He laughed—moved an arm-chair nearer the fire—then sat down.

After a long silence, I said :

“ You know that Mervyn’s living with me ? ”

“ Yes, he told me some time ago.”

I began to talk about Mervyn, only because I wanted to restrict the conversation to "safe" subjects, but, against my will, I ended by saying :

"Mervyn tells me that you think I shall find the murderer."

"I told you so too. But Mervyn possibly isolated it from its context. I was telling him how uncannily clairvoyant you are. So much so that, if you really wanted to find the murderer, you would find him."

"What did Mervyn say?"

"He said you certainly were clairvoyant—and that you wanted to find the murderer more than anything else in the world."

Again, there was a long silence.

Then, simply in order to say something, I asked :

"Any idea when the colonel returns?"

"No—none."

Pause.

"What's happened to the cuckoo-clock?"

"The main-spring's gone. They'll take three months to repair it."

I knew that if I did not go now I should tell him things about myself which I had told no one. I also knew that, if I went, he would know I had run away. I had seen him only once since Carol's death—I had avoided him ever since my meeting with Mrs. Norton—so he would certainly guess that I had not come to-day to chatter generalities.

He rose, switched on a reading-lamp, then crossed to the window and drew the curtain.

Why had he suddenly made the room more intimate? Had he done it deliberately—or had it no significance?

He returned to his arm-chair. I knew that he would not be the first to speak.

The bedroom door must have been ajar, because I could hear a clock ticking.

I do not know how long the silence lasted.

"I've come to tell you something. You knew that, of course. Ever since our first meeting I've known that, sooner or later, you'd be involved in a crisis in my life. But there's all the difference between knowing that an hour will come—and hearing it strike."

" You torture yourself, Max. You always have."

" Not always. It's quite simple, really. My difficulties come from the fact that I have only two responses to life : joy or horror. Every thought, every emotion, stems from one or the other. You'll see why later."

He said nothing, so I went on :

" It's been said that to confess is not simply to admit an act, but to lay before someone the inner history of that act. The act is apparent : its roots are hidden. Confession reveals the roots."

Then I told him that, although we had met intermittently during the last ten years, he knew nothing essential about my childhood and less than nothing, therefore, about circumstances which had shaped me as a mould shapes molten metal.

" I'll try to keep this short, but it's not easy. All I need tell you about my parents is that they were sensitive, unhappy, isolated people. I think I've told you we travelled all over Europe till I was seven."

" Yes, I know that. And you once said what a shock it was when you discovered how different your parents were from those of your school fellows."

" What I didn't tell you was the kind of life I lived after we settled in Kent. I was about seven then—a nervous, imaginative child. So much so, that I used to walk in my sleep. You might remember that. It's important."

Then I went on :

" I did not mix with any contemporaries till I went to school when I was twelve. Kent was magic when I was a child. I still dream of it. My mother was practically an invalid ; my father seemed like a man in a trance. I had a tutor, but, apart from him, my only companion was a maid, Hilda. She was eighteen and eventually became my mother's companion. I spent whole days alone. I was radiantly happy. And I was innocent—as practically no modern child could be innocent. I knew nothing of evil—nothing of suffering. I confused the world of imagination with the actual world. I had no idea that I was lonely."

After a pause, I said :

" Sorry to inflict this on you, but it's necessary. I know that what's coming will seem ridiculous—but confession

involves pulling off psychic fig-leaves, and we all look a little absurd without them."

He said nothing. He was leaning forward, gazing into the fire. Snow silenced every sound in the outside world. I could still hear the clock ticking in the bedroom.

"I explored our part of Kent pretty thoroughly. Then, one day, I went in a different direction. It was a marvellous May morning. After I'd walked a short way, the road dipped sharply into a wood. I rounded a sudden bend—and there was the Empty House."

"An empty house?"

"No. *The Empty House*. I stopped dead and stared at it. Desolation! Heart-chilling desolation! No one could have lived there for years. To look at it, was to feel something deep in you wither. Nevertheless, as I remained rooted by the gates, affection for this tragic house glowed in me. Above all, it seemed familiar. I felt that I had returned to it. But soon curiosity raged in me about the people who had once lived here. What were they like? Where had they gone? Where were they now? I raced home, determined to find out everything about them.

"I discovered nothing about them, but the Empty House obsessed me more every day. I began to *imagine* the people who had lived there. At first they were shadowy, but gradually they became defined. A father and mother; a boy, Maurice; and a girl—Fredrika. Eventually, they seemed more real than any one I knew.

"Then something very odd happened. They ceased to be the family who had once lived in the Empty House. They were living there now. Yes, *now*. Imagination easily effected this miracle. I saw the old house, not as it was, but transformed by Fredrika's presence. Every day she became more real and more precious. Fredrika, with her elfin features, lit brows, and imaginative eyes! I loved her as I had never loved any one. And I love her now. Yes—now!"

"I can understand that, Max."

"You're probably the only man who could—which is one reason why I'm here."

I rose, then began to pace the room.

"I sometimes think that nothing quickens a child's imagination so surely as loneliness. You remember that

Robert Louis Stevenson made a play-fellow of his shadow. But I must make this short.

“ Although I did not know it, it was during this Fredrika period that I began to walk in my sleep. This frightened my father so much that he slept in my room for some months. Eventually, however, he evidently decided that I was cured, because he went back to his own room. Well, one night I *dreamed* I was going to the Empty House and that Fredrika and Maurice were waiting for me. It was a perfect May morning. So, *in my dream*, I walked to the Empty House—to find Maurice waving from one window and Fredrika from another. Then something amazing happened. I woke up. It was night. I was fully dressed. I was standing by the rusty gates. Never had the Empty House seemed so sinister as it did on this autumn night under a moon bewitched.”

“ Weren’t you frightened ? ”

“ Not particularly. What appalled me was the contrast between the Empty House of my dream and the reality. Anyway, this so alarmed my father that, the next day, he took me to Dr. Gandy, whom I liked very much, I told him about Fredrika and Maurice and their parents—how much I loved them—and how much I wanted them to come back to the Empty House. I thought this surprised him. He asked if any one had talked to me about the people who used to live there, but I said that no one had told me anything. I had *imagined* Fredrika and her family. Then he said that our talk should be a secret between us, but I was to go to him at any time if I wanted to.”

“ Never heard anything quite like this, Max.”

“ Later, I learned the *facts* about the people who had lived at the Empty House. The year I was born, a family lived there consisting of a man and his wife, a boy and a girl——”

“ But——”

“ Wait ! The mother was lovely ; the children were admired for miles round. Then the father was ruined—totally ruined—overnight. He came home—shot his wife—shot the children—then shot himself. Next morning, the milkman found out what had happened—and went straight to Dr. Gandy.”

“ You mean to tell me that the family who had *actually*

lived in that house was identical with the one you had *imagined*?"

"Yes, practically identical."

"That's the most astounding part of the whole story. You'd have made a fortune as a medium, Max. You know what happens to people when you're not with them, and you felt what had happened in that house."

"It's not surprising that I'm sensitive. I was the only child of eccentric parents—I was brought up in a hot-house atmosphere—and mixed with no one of my own age till I was twelve. Anyhow, we're nearly at the end of the preface. About the same time as I learned the truth about the Empty House, I discovered the facts about sex. Discovered them in the crudest way imaginable. Remember that—in the crudest way imaginable."

"How old were you then?"

"Eight. And wholly innocent. From that moment, my imagination was divided. It had its heaven and its hell—and although a marriage between them has frequently been arranged, it has not taken place yet. Not yet."

I continued to pace the room for some minutes, then stopped by the window.

It is a curious fact that when you tell someone the most intimate things about yourself, you half-forget that you have a listener. Probably you cannot really believe that you are at last revealing what has been hidden for so long. If a miser, after years of secret liaison with his hoard, were suddenly to show it to a stranger, he would probably think he was only dreaming. The utterly unprecedented always seems unreal. Anyhow, I only half-believed that Antony was in an arm-chair by the fire, listening.

"You never escape from anything which totally captures your imagination—and the Empty House totally captured mine when I was a child. It became a symbol. That is, it became something to which I related experience—something which interpreted experience. It symbolised Suffering. When I was a student in Paris, I believed that the crucial moment in every life is the first glimpse of the Empty House—the house of crime and death. Later, it seemed to me that the whole world is an Empty House. And now, God knows, the whole world is an Empty House—a house of crime and death."

At last I went over to him and said :

“ You realise, of course, that this is the confession of a romantic.”

“ What’s a romantic ? ”

“ A romantic is one who faces the facts—but denies their ultimate validity. One who admits all the nightmare facts—but asserts that they are created by nightmare values. One who dreams in the Empty House—with his eyes open.”

Then I went on :

“ Anyhow, romantics will probably soon be extinct. Power has been elevated above Life, so those who refuse to worship the new Moloch will be—liquidated. Incidentally, what an apt word for murder, in a commercial age ! Every nation is striving to make unconditional surrender to the Machine-Moloch, so it seems pretty certain that those who value Life more than Power—those sensitive to beauty, wonder, mystery—will be unable to endure the pestilential atmosphere created by envy, fear, murder. Only toughs will survive. And they will celebrate their triumph by blowing themselves and the whole earth to smithereens.”

“ That’s true enough, Max—by the surface evidence.”

“ I’m talking in terms of surface evidence. The power-pattern is being inexorably established—despite the shrill protestations, and the falsetto enthusiasms, of sentimentalists. It seems rather unfortunate that men should possess almost unlimited power at the precise moment when they have ceased to believe in God—in themselves—or the devil—but there it is.”

I took a cigarette from a box on the mantelpiece, then sat down.

“ I wish I’d known you, Max, when you were a student in Paris.”

“ A student, in love with an imaginary Fredrika ! A student, who believed that the artist-tribe to which he belonged was destined to exorcise the Empty House ! A student who, despite these idealistic aspirations, maintained a secret entente with the underworld of sensation ! Why on earth do you wish that you’d known him ? ”

“ That student wasn’t far wrong. Only the artist, in the deepest sense of the word, can exorcise the Empty House. And, what’s more, you still believe it.”

"I probably should, if I were still an artist."

"Surely there's plenty of evidence that you are?"

"There's none. And hasn't been, for years. I've done nothing since *Enigma*. I've *seen* nothing since then. There was something I thought I wanted to do, but it never came to anything."

"What was it?"

"Moving crowds on the pavement—in the depth of the black-out. An endless column of people, fugitively and dimly revealed, from ever-changing angles, by momentary flashes of torches. Groping indeterminate people—like bewildered hosts of anonymous dead."

After a pause, I went on :

"That haunted me for a time, but inner compulsion was evidently lacking, or I shouldn't be talking about it. I should have done it. Anyhow, I'm not a non-stop artist. It's only during 'Fredrika moments' that I'm one at all. Moments when all things are revealed in their unique individuality. Moments when you know nothing, and are everything. Moments of pure contemplation, when you realise that the street at which you are looking will never present *this* aspect again. Once, once only, in the whole of its history, will there be these people—those shadows—that cloud. You are confronted by a uniquely-occurring, swiftly-vanishing scene. You are confronted by a fugitive *once only*—in the never-ending flux."

"You'll be an artist to the day of your death."

"Most artists die twice. And the second death is the less tragic. To paraphrase a well-known sentence, I'd say that it is with artists as it is with snakes : those who cannot cast their skins—die. I'd rather stop altogether than become repetitive. Unless there is ever-deepening inner development, which is reflected in an artist's work, he has died the first death. And that remains true, even if he continues to produce work after work of great—stationary—merit. That only means that he's lying-in-state—which doesn't alter the fact that he's dead."

A few minutes later, I rose, then said :

"You know that I came to-day against my will?"

"Yes, I know that."

"I'm going now. I shan't come again, if I can help it. You've heard the first instalment of a confession. I hope

to God there won't be a sequel ! But, before I go, is there anything you want to tell me ? "

" Only that you were right about Mrs. Norton. You said she wouldn't last long and she—won't."

" What's happened ? "

" She had a collapse about ten days ago. She's been in bed since and looks like a spectre."

" I can't talk about her."

When I reached the door, I stopped and said :

" Anything you want to ask me ? "

" Only this : When you were here last, you said you were going to find out everything about Carol. Have you found out—everything ? "

" Quite enough to go on with. Incidentally, the night I slept here, you said you knew I liked being read to. Only Carol could have told you that. Perhaps she told you—everything."

He said nothing, and a moment later I left him.

CHAPTER FIVE

IN THE EARLY HOURS

Two o'clock in the morning.

I had gone to bed at eleven, intending to read, but switched off the light before midnight, although I knew that I should not sleep. . . .

There are psychological landslides no less than physical ones. In the same way as rocks and stones secretly form an unstable partnership which, collapsing, hurls them downward with a roar : so is there a clandestine grouping of thoughts and emotions which, more and more precariously poised, finally fall and overwhelm the mind—obliterating old beliefs, and creating strange transfiguring perspectives.

Since Carol's death I have made many discoveries about her—isolated discoveries on different levels and, therefore, seemingly unrelated. Perhaps the first was the extent of her physical dominion, but—more important, and more surprising—was the realisation of my psychic dependence on her. Had I been told a few weeks ago that her presence

had become essential, that Sundays spent at her flat satisfied a deep psychological need, it would have seemed a travesty of our apparent relations. Even now, it is difficult to believe that pride obscured the truth of those relations so completely that nothing less than her death could have compelled its recognition.

Every detail of our meetings presents a new aspect in retrospect. For instance, when I telephoned her, it was always to ask if I could go to her flat immediately and, on no single occasion, did Carol say that she was engaged. As I did not know then the number of her friends and acquaintances, this did not surprise me, but now it seems remarkable. And it seems equally extraordinary that, whenever I wanted to spend a Sunday at her flat, she was always available.

Everything presents a new aspect. It is as if her spirit is compelling me to recognise the significance of all I ignored when she was alive.

Then, as I lay in the darkness, alone and wretched, I was numbed by the realisation that never—never—should I see her again.

And then, unheralded as a landslide, came the overwhelming knowledge that *I was in love with her*.

The transformation scene created by this discovery was so total that I could only stare at it with the astonishment of a child at a pantomime.

But almost immediately an interruption occurred—and a dramatic one.

Suddenly the light was switched on and Mervyn stumbled into the room—a Mervyn not easily recognisable. Staring eyes blazed in a pale distorted face, while he made jerky movements with his arms as if trying to free himself from an invisible assailant.

I sprang up and went to him.

“Are you ill?”

As he did not reply, I said :

“Get into bed!”

He pointed to an arm-chair, so I guided him to it, then switched on the electric fire.

For some moments he lay huddled in a heap, but at last managed to say :

“Ridiculous, of course. . . . Frightfully sorry. . . . And so on. . . . Sort of collapse. . . . Hysteria, really.”

It was some time before he was able to talk coherently.

“Terribly apologetic, and all that. Absolutely childish ! D’you happen to remember by any chance what I told you about my being blown up at the war—and about a young soldier called Ray ?”

“Of course I remember !”

“Really ? Well, every few months I dream the whole thing again—to the last detail. Extraordinary ! I hear the shellfire—see our fellows retreating—then there’s a terrific explosion and I find myself doing a series of complicated somersaults in mid-air. I fall to earth, completely stunned, then look round and see Ray, quite near me—dead.”

Pause.

“I have this dream every few months. Always ends with my seeing Ray dead. It really is very—unpleasant. When I wake, I daren’t be alone. Perfectly absurd, of course, but you know what ridiculous creatures human beings are.”

Another pause. A long one.

“I say, Max ! I suppose there isn’t a drink in the place ?”

“Afraid not.”

“What’s the time ?”

“About half-past two.”

“Shouldn’t think old Carshalton’s asleep yet. A man who’s interpreting the Book of Revelations couldn’t be in bed by two-thirty, do you think ?”

“Doesn’t seem likely.”

“I’ll go up and try to get a tot of rum. Better put on my corduroys. Surely this ice age can’t last much longer.”

He returned in about three-quarters of an hour—wholly himself again—and enveloped in an aromatic aura.

“I say, Max ! Carshalton really is a remarkable bloke. There he was in his wizard’s gown, wind-blown hair, and prophetic eyes, pondering this text : ‘And she brought forth a man child, who was to rule all nations with a rod of iron.’ I asked if that were Hitler and he said that, until recently, he had been certain it was Hitler—but now he was compelled to look in a more easterly direction. Anyhow, Carshalton is a real Christian. He gave me two big tots of rum. And he sent one down for you.”

“I don’t want it.”

"You—don't?" His tone tried to register disappointment, but was unconvincing. "Right! Back in no time!"

He returned in about five minutes with a small tray on which stood a steaming tumbler, a thick exercise book, a packet of cigarettes, and some sheets of paper. He put the tray on a table near his arm-chair, sat down, took a sip of rum, then said :

"The real trouble, Max, is that my capital is trust money, so I can't get at it."

"Surely you've tried to break the settlement?"

"Tried? Tried? Every lawyer in London knows the clauses of that settlement deed by heart. They recite them in their sleep—to the consternation of their wives, who think they are talking in code. But the point is that I have a trustee. A monster—Ezra Barnacle. You can do nothing with Ezra."

"You can't?"

"Nothing! If I telephone him, directly I give my name, he says: 'No, Mervyn.' If I write, he returns the letter, unopened, with 'No, Mervyn' written on the back of the envelope. Ezra is a monster—a Victorian monster—who has a remarkable resemblance to the Prince Consort, and dresses exactly like him."

Pause.

"By the way, Max, talking of Victorians reminds me. I was reading an article by a Left Literary Bloke when I fell asleep last night. This Left Literary Bloke sees all modern Youth pulsing with Progress—and eyes aflame with Utopian visions. Extraordinary delusion! I meet many young men who are eighteenth-century Tories—and I've just met a young woman who is as Victorian as a sampler. I must tell you about her."

He took a pull at his rum, then continued :

"She's about twenty-three. She has deep, earnest, brown eyes, and she lives with three maiden aunts at Highgate. She is secretary to an old, old family lawyer who practises in a vault near Lincoln's Inn. She's shy, demure, and blushes frequently. She reads the parish magazine, *Little Women*, and *What Katy Did At School*. I sat next to her on the top of a bus. I did not look at her, but just started talking as I always do. Well, at last I noticed that she had not said one word, so I glanced at her. Great,

serious, trustful eyes were regarding me with coy amazement. She said she'd never spoken to a stranger before—and had never met any one like me."

"Which seems probable."

"I've met her two or three times. I think I can say that I've established a bridgehead in her affections. I shall consolidate—then fan out. Eventually, of course, I shall execute a pincer movement. That's the one I like."

"Tell me this, Mervyn: Don't any of the innumerable women you meet ever ask if you are married?"

"It's odd you should say that, because last week one of them did ask if I were married. I said I could not answer that question—for security reasons."

After a silence, I said:

"What I was going to ask is this: Do you get any satisfaction from your numerous affairs with women?"

"No, no, nothing to speak of! For one thing, it's such a repetitive performance and, as someone said, all repetition is anti-spiritual."

"So you don't care a lot about it, but you go on with it. Is that right?"

"Absolutely! There are several reasons. One is that sex desire is given more publicity than anything else. And I suppose that has an effect on the subconscious mind—if modern people still possess one. The result is that you get what Frieda calls—urges. And off you go again! And so, Mervyn Maitland, like everyone else, sells eternity to get a toy. That's another phrase I picked up somewhere."

Pause.

"It's like smoking, Max. I dislike cigarettes—they give me a beastly mouth in the morning—but I smoke more and more of them. Mind you, I'm not as bad as Sydney Sparks, who tried to train himself to smoke cigarettes in his sleep—with the result that his wife ran off with a fireman. Most sex, like smoking, is habit, my dear fellow. Still, perhaps it's better to be humble through indulgence than proud through abstinence. I've noticed that most abstainers are pretty frosty with spiritual pride. Anyway, there's a tidal wave of sex nowadays—which isn't surprising, as this little island is bursting with Americans, Canadians, Czechs, Poles, Free French, Dutch, and other members of the peace-loving nations. So, inevitably, sex rages. After all, sex

is international. There's no language bar. It's basic Esperanto."

He rose, stretched with huge satisfaction, moved his chair nearer the fire, then sat down.

"Listen, Max ! This is serious. I've been haunting the Mirage Club lately and I do wish you'd go there sometimes."

"I loathe the damned place !"

"All the same, you must go. I'm *certain* the murderer will be found there."

"Why are you *certain* ?"

"It's a hunch. But I take hunches very seriously ever since the one I ignored which came on my wedding morning and which said : 'Run, Mervyn, *run*.' Besides, if I were the murderer—and, incidentally, several people think I am, which somehow makes me feel much more definite—I should haunt that club. No one would expect me to do that—and I'd hear everything. You must go there. You're a real psychic. I don't mean, of course, that you'd *look* for the murderer. That would be quite useless, because there are always a dozen people in the Mirage, every one of whom has obviously committed at least one murder. The point is that if *I* can feel something odd in the place, *you* will find the murderer."

After a silence, I asked :

"How do you know that I'm not the murderer ?"

"I don't. To be frank, at one time I half-thought you were."

"At which time ?"

"The first week after Carol's death. I ran into you outside the Café Royal—we went to the club, and I read you the paper report of the murder—and you did not even say that you knew Carol. I telephoned you very late that night, and you still did not say that you knew Carol. So I really did wonder if you had killed her, especially as you looked so ghastly. Then I decided that you hadn't killed her, but you knew who had. All this, of course, was before I came here to live."

"And what do you think now ?"

"Oh, my dear fellow, now I simply haven't a guess ! We've been living together for some weeks and the better you get to know any one, the more mysterious that person becomes. It's only people you scarcely know who seem

clear-cut and definite. If you *live* with a person, that person becomes more and more incomprehensible and more and more mysterious. That fact should make marriage an astounding adventure, but it seldom seems to work out that way."

Almost immediately he went on :

" Anyhow, you *must* go to the Mirage Club. By the way, who do you think I met there last night? Last person you'd expect to find in a basement. Nicholas Nitouche. You know, the Foreign Office bloke. He said there was a bit of a fog and he went down some steps, in search of the Underground—and emerged in the underworld. We had quite a talk. He stressed that he did not want to be an alarmist, but there was no doubt that peace would explode soon—and that then everything would be like all hell on holiday."

Pause.

" However, that's not what I meant to tell you. Who do you think I met to-day? "

" I haven't the slightest idea."

" Ferdy Fauchon. Incidentally, he has found somewhere to live. Influence, of course. He knows the nine Ministers dealing with Housing—knows 'em intimately. So he's found a home at last. He's living in a converted static water-tank. Says it's not bad. Bit overlooked. Anyhow, as you know, he is an extremely vulgar fellow. I told him we were living together and he said we were well matched, because you had done everything except fall in love ; and that I had done everything—except get in the family way."

" What did you say to that? "

" I told him he was quite wrong. I said you'd been in love with your work from the cradle—and that I was perpetually pregnant."

PART IV - - FOUR DAYS

CHAPTER ONE

A MYSTERIOUS VISITOR

SOON AFTER my all-night session with Mervyn, an event occurred which is frozen in my memory.

As a result of Mervyn's insistence, I agreed to visit the *Mirage Club* on the condition that I went alone. It was certain that, if he came with me, I should meet all kinds of people who would cross-examine me about Carol, whereas, if I were alone, it would be unlikely that I should run into any one I knew.

On my third visit, however, just before I left, a man whom I had not seen for years, called Stacey Mortimer, suddenly appeared in the doorway and exclaimed :

“ Max Arnold ! Good God, my dear fellow, what on earth are you doing here ? ”

As Mortimer shouted the question, my name was heard by several people clustered near the entrance. I escaped as soon as I could, then, having decided never to go to the club again, I forgot the incident until an event occurred, directly derived from it. . . .

It was nearly midnight. Ten minutes earlier, Mervyn had telephoned to say that he was staying with a friend for a couple of nights. For some moments I had been looking at the very miscellaneous pile of books on the table near his sofa-bed, when the front-door bell rang.

Imagining that the visitor would be one of Mervyn's countless acquaintances, or a “ displaced person ” to whom he had once given a night's lodging, I went into the hall and opened the door—to find myself confronted by a malevolent individual of about forty-five.

“ Max Arnold ? ”

“ That is my name.”

“ Good ! All alone ? ”

“ Yes.”

“ Better still.”

He came into the hall, then stopped and looked round. There was something automatic about his movements, and something insolent in his attitude. He wore a soiled brown hat, pulled down over the eyes, and a stained mackintosh, only one button of which was fastened. His shoes had not been cleaned for a considerable time and the rumpled spotted suit hung loosely on his emaciated figure. One way and another, therefore, he looked a down-and-out, but a closer scrutiny revealed that everything he wore had originally been of first-class quality, consequently his grimy appearance was wholly the result of neglect.

Without glancing at me, he pointed to the door of the sitting-room.

“In there?”

I did not reply immediately, so he repeated in a tone of extreme irritability :

“In there?”

Although I loathed this man as I had never loathed any one, I felt that it was essential to placate him.

As I followed him down the hall, something about his walk convinced me that he was physically exhausted.

He stopped directly he entered the sitting-room, looked round for some moments, then exclaimed :

“Don’t tell me this junk’s yours!”

“I took this flat furnished for duration.”

“Thought so.”

For the first time, he looked at me—obliquely, but with remarkable concentration. He had short sandy hair, deep-sunk eyes, puffy features, and thin lips twisted into a perpetual half-sneer.

“No. This isn’t your set-up, Mr. Max Arnold.”

“You seem to know a good deal about me.”

“In one way, I know nothing. In another, I know—everything.”

“Really? Perhaps you’ll tell me your name—and what you want.”

“My name? Oh, yes! Hilary Harcourt. Distinguished, eh? What do I want? A talk with you—a long one. And now, I suppose, I’ll have to tell you how I found out where you live. You’re sure to ask, but it’s a fearful bore.”

He stamped with irritation, then went on :

"For years, I've wanted to meet the man who painted *Enigma*. But I've been away—a long way away—for a long time. I only came to London a few weeks ago. I looked up your name in the telephone book, but it isn't there. The other night, at the *Mirage Club*, I heard a man shout 'Max Arnold!' Later, I learned that you lived with Mervyn Maitland—and everyone in London knows where that lunatic lives."

"Do you know Maitland?"

"Course not! But I've heard him talk at that club. It's—revealing—that you live with a lunatic, and pay for the privilege."

He was still standing, looking at his shoes, but after a long silence he added :

"I've seen you before, but didn't know who you were."

After another silence, he asked :

"Is it true that you're doing camouflage work?"

"Perfectly true."

"I bet you're damned good at it. Are you still on the job?"

"No. I've been ill. I'm on three months' sick leave. I don't suppose I'll go back. The war will be over."

"Over! It will start when it stops."

With an immense effort, I managed to say :

"Why don't you sit down?"

"That's an idea. Give me a cigarette."

"There's a box on the table."

He lit a cigarette. Again there was silence. For some reason I felt that he kept forgetting his surroundings—then rediscovered them with a start. He seemed completely unaware of the fact that I was studying him intently—studying the small feet, the tiny hands with their disproportionate large knuckles, the worn-out figure, the quick, audible breathing.

"All that's as may be," he said at last. "Good enough for a text-book psychologist, I've no doubt."

These remarks, presumably, had relevance to his thoughts. They certainly had none to anything else.

About two minutes passed before he said :

"I want to talk about that murder. The *night* of the murder. You were in London, of course, because you had that letter from her. Pity you did not go round to see her."

"Were you in town that night?"

"Oh, yes! I was out that night. Not far from Mitre Street. Quite near, in fact."

"Didn't you get lost in the fog?"

For the first time, he looked at me full-face. There was a vacant fixity in the pale eyes—not unlike that sometimes seen in the eyes of drug addicts—then he said in a tone that was almost a purr :

"I love fogs. I've always loved them. You're immersed in a shapeless soundless sea. Memories are obliterated. You feel like God, confronting chaos. You keep still—terribly still—still as a standing stone on a midnight moor. Silence annihilates you. Only you are alive. And you listen—listen—for the footfall of a ghost."

"Did you hear any one—that night?"

"I'll ask you a question. Suppose, when you got her letter, you *had* gone to her flat. Just suppose that. D'you think I'd have heard you? I was near Mitre Street. Very near. D'you think I'd have heard you—in that alley? You'd have come by the alley, wouldn't you?"

"Probably."

"I might even have *seen* you. I see much better in fogs than most people."

"How long did you stay out that night?"

"How long? Oh, quite a time."

"And saw no one."

"I never said I saw no one."

"You'd have told the police, if you had."

"I never said I hadn't told the police."

After a long silence, he went on :

"Pretty level pegging up till then, wasn't it? Still, you're a psychologist—and not a text-book one. Why didn't you go round, when you got her letter?"

"I was ill. I didn't get in till eleven. It was the first night I had been out for weeks."

He rose suddenly—went into the hall—returning almost immediately with his mackintosh. He looked at it minutely—put it on—then took a notebook out of the right-hand pocket. I was wondering whether he intended to go, when he lit another cigarette and sat down at the table. For some moments, he stared at the fire, still holding the notebook in his hand. He seemed so grotesque that I had an

insane desire to pull his sandy hair, just to make certain that it wasn't a wig.

He opened the notebook, flicked over several pages, covered with tiny script, produced a fountain pen, then began to write rapidly.

Several minutes passed, but he remained so absorbed that I felt almost sure he had forgotten my presence. Then, as I continued to watch him, his attitude suddenly seemed so familiar that I exclaimed :

“ I remember ! ”

He started violently, then thrust the notebook into his pocket.

“ What do you remember ? ”

“ You said you had seen me before. It was at the Mirage Club, when I was there with Maitland and a woman.”

“ When you were there with the Polish woman—trying to find out what she knew.”

“ Really ? I didn't know she'd be there—and she asked me to go to her table.”

“ You worry too much. That's your trouble. They won't find the murderer. You know that. I know that. He's too clever for 'em.”

“ Do you think it was that Chelsea student ? ”

He crossed his arms, then rocked to and fro, shaking with silent laughter.

“ Wasn't that marvellous luck ? Unbelievable ! He knew her—he killed himself—and didn't leave a letter saying why. That's the kind of luck a genius gets.”

Then, with an abrupt change of manner, he turned and asked :

“ Know what my trouble is ? ”

“ Haven't a guess.”

“ I can only talk to a genius. That's why I'm always alone.”

Then he added :

“ You've a touch of genius.”

There was nothing to say to that, so I said nothing.

He held his head with his hands for some moments, then went on :

“ You're different from the mass-produced mob. Your face is branded with suffering. Not *worry*. Suffering ! It's

branded with thoughts and emotions unknown to the average man. What's the average man know about anything? All he wants is the possible: a villa, an uncritical wife, a dud little car, and brats as boring as himself."

Pause.

"They say this will be the century of the average man. Christ! Every morning, all humanity will leave the same villa, at the same time, go to the same job, by the same train. Every evening, all humanity will catch the same train, back to the same villa, be greeted by the same uncritical wife and the same dense-faced brats. This comatose condition will be called—happiness."

Another pause.

"You know nothing about that. You've never known anything about morons. You never will. You're either in heaven or hell."

I said nothing. My silence evidently amused him, because he laughed.

"It's all in your face. You know—no one better—that everything is in the face. Luckily for us, most people can't decipher faces. Of course, you have very elevated moments. Your work shows that. You gate-crash heaven and see visions. You were immensely elevated when you painted *Enigma*. You popped into the Garden of Eden by the back door—but the angel with the flaming sword soon had you out of it."

"Does that sort of thing happen to you?"

"I have my visions, Mr. Arnold. I have my visions—and they are ideals, in their way. Satan, too, is an idealist, in his way. He doesn't catch the same train to town every day. He's more interested in quality than quantity. He's a cosmic exponent of Private Enterprise—and provides the Almighty with formidable competition. Some people think he's put him out of business. But we'll stick to you. I've come here to-night with a very definite object."

He rose, wandered about the room, looking at the furniture and the major's military text-books.

"Not your set-up! It must preen your perversity to be marooned in this museum."

He pulled open various drawers, eventually trying the bottom drawer of the bureau—containing the Fredrika drawings and the Carol photographs.

"A locked drawer! Well, well! People like us always have a locked drawer in their rooms—or in their minds."

He went back to his chair, patted the pocket of his mackintosh to assure himself that the notebook was in it, then said :

"You don't always have elevated *Enigma* moments. Every imaginative man needs—relaxation—to slacken the tension of his nerves."

"Maybe."

"There's no 'maybe' about it. You didn't always see Carol as the *Enigma* lady."

He produced his pocket-book, took out a drawing, then threw it on the table.

"Recognise that?"

It was a drawing of a half-dressed Carol, which I had done two or three years ago and which she had liked so much that I gave it to her.

"Where did you get this?"

"You recognise it, then?"

"Where did you get it?"

"There's plenty of ways I might have got it."

"Such as?"

"She might have sold it."

"She didn't sell it."

"No? Perhaps it was stolen."

"She always carried it in her bag."

"Things get stolen from bags."

"Did you buy it?"

"Yes—at a price."

"When?"

"Can't say to a day. Round about the time she was killed."

I went nearer to the table. He seized my arm.

"You won't tear it up!"

"Why the hell should I tear it up?"

I stared at the drawing, re-living the autumn afternoon on which I had given it to her—watching her delight when she found that it would fit the celluloid case in which she kept her identity card.

"Gets you, doesn't it? That drawing's worth fifty *Enigmas*. *Enigma* would be all right—with a few additions."

At last I managed to say :

"So the drawing appeals to you?"

"Course! It's too damned lady-like, but that could be—remedied. You must know Carol as no one did. And I'd bet a lot that she knew *you* as no one else does. Much better! By the way, it's difficult not to hate the woman who knows all the little things about you. Damned difficult! All the little undignified things which no one else knows. Still, this is the real point: I suppose even you could do with more money, couldn't you? Mervyn Maitland must cost a packet."

"Suppose I could do with more money, what do I have to do to get it? Always assuming that you have any."

"Don't you bother about that. I've plenty. Plenty! Now, listen! And get this very straight."

He lit a cigarette, inhaled the smoke deeply, then said:

"It so happens that Carol rings all my bells—and I've a lot of bells. Huge belfries, full of 'em. I'd rather look at that lady-like drawing than at a dozen naked film stars. One's queer about things like that—as you know. I want you to do a series of drawings of Carol—not lady-like ones—and I'll buy 'em. At a price which will surprise you."

"That would be a—unique—commission for me."

"Naturally. I'm a unique person. Don't imagine you'll meet any one in the least like me, because you won't. And don't pretend that you're not a bit odd yourself, because I'm damned certain you are. You wouldn't live with a lunatic like Maitland if there weren't something you don't want to think about."

"You're certainly a psychologist."

"The greatest there's ever been."

I moved a chair nearer to his, then decided to remain standing.

"You may be the greatest psychologist there's ever been, but your suggestion ignores several essentials from my point of view."

"What are they?"

"My reputation, for one. Any one who knows anything would see that I'd done the drawings you want."

"But I shouldn't show them to any one!"

"Maybe not. But I've only your word for that—the word of a man who walked in from the street."

" You must be mad ! Show them to any one ! D'you think I'd *share* them ? "

" Have you shown that drawing to any one ? "

" 'Course not ! "

" By the way, did you know Carol ? "

He stared at me.

" Know her ! "

" That's what I said."

" You do ask some damned soft questions ! I told you I only came to London recently."

" Still, you might have met her at the Mirage Club."

" I didn't join the confounded place till after she was dead."

" Well, you evidently like it, because you're always there."

" You've got to be somewhere. That's the hell of it—you've got to be somewhere ! That's why I love fogs. Then—you're nowhere. Everything's gone. Everything ! Squalid streets ; frightened faces—*gone*. Nothing ! You're a thought—in a stupendous shadowy brain. The *last* thought—in a stupendous shadowy brain."

He looked round, as if to make certain we were alone, then said :

" Tell you something. A secret ! "

" Well ? "

" I *did* hear someone on the night of the murder. Near the end of the alley ! "

He looked up at me.

" Only I could have heard that footfall. But I'd hear a ghost—walking on tip-toe."

" Did you see any one ? "

" Not telling you all my secrets."

Suddenly he exclaimed :

" There's no one here, is there ? "

" Who do you think might join us ? "

" Not surprised you don't like this room."

" Who do you think might join us ? "

" Can't think of any one. Can you ? "

" Yes."

" Who ? . . . Who ? "

" Carol ! "

He rose, very slowly, then stood near me.

" You've—seen her—here ? "

" I've not seen her, but I heard her say my name—in a voice that was half hers."

" That's nothing. One is always hearing voices—all sorts of voices—day and night."

He looked round the room, then, evidently reassured, picked up the drawing.

" What memories *you* must have of her ! Do they wheel endlessly, like suddenly-frightened birds ? Do you ache for her ? Do millions of maddening Carols stampede through your mind ? Is her image tattooed in your memory ? "

He waited—then began to laugh.

" You don't answer. You daren't answer ! You won't open the locked door in your mind. You're the real *Enigma*—Mr. Max Arnold."

Again he produced the notebook, sat at the table and began to write.

Several minutes passed, but he did not pause. This time, I was convinced he had forgotten my presence. Eventually he put the notebook away, but remained at the table, in the attitude of one listening intently.

" Never ! Not there ! Is it likely ? "

I struck a match, and the sound made him aware again of his surroundings.

" Sure Maitland isn't here ? "

" He's away for the night."

" He'll go for good soon. You'll see. You won't be able to dodge being alone. Not you ! You can knock on all the doors of the world—but every one of them will be opened by Mr. Max Arnold."

" Do you find that every door is opened by—Hilary Harcourt ? "

" Distinguished, eh ? Hilary Harcourt ! You don't forget it, do you ? "

Then he said, with an abrupt change of manner :

" You'll do the drawings I want. Otherwise . . . but you'll do them. And you won't show them to any one. Understand ? "

" I'm not likely to."

" Never mind about 'not likely to.' You won't ! And you're not to say you've seen me. Understand ? And don't you tell Maitland."

"I shan't tell Maitland. But I want that drawing of Carol."

"What for? No, wait! Perhaps you'd better have it. Yes, you'd better have it! You'll give it back?"

"Oh, yes, yes!"

"And show it to no one?"

"Do you think I want to parade it to all my friends? You can put it in an envelope, if you like."

"That's an idea! Here! This one will fit."

He put the drawing into an envelope, then pressed the flap so frequently, to make certain the gum was holding, that I said:

"There's some sealing-wax on the bureau, if you want it."

"Yes, of course! Good idea!"

He struck a match, put a great blob of wax on the back of the envelope, licked his thumb, then pressed the wax.

"There! What shall I do with it?"

"Put it in that book. And now I'll have to ask you to go. I'm fearfully tired."

"Tired? *You're* tired! That's rich!"

When we reached the hall, he said:

"Come and see me off."

As we went down the short flight of stairs leading to the main entrance, he laughed.

"Easy to get in and out without being seen—or heard. No fool, are you? At dead of night, you'd make no more noise than a ghost."

Then he added:

"I shall go through the alley. Quicker, isn't it?"

When we reached the pavement, he said in a whisper:

"Say nothing. Show nothing. Otherwise. . . ."

A moment later he vanished.

I returned to the sitting-room, then fell into a chair—physically exhausted, and psychically sick.

CHAPTER TWO

REVELATIONS

EARLY the next morning I telephoned Haimes and was put through immediately.

" You wanted me to let you know if anything unusual happened, so—"

" And it has ? "

" Very unusual."

" When could you come round ? "

" Any time. Now, if you like."

" Good ! I'll be waiting for you."

When I went into his room Haimes greeted me with his usual imperturbability, nevertheless I felt an eagerness in him which was new. Public interest in the Chelsea Murder had not lessened and, recently, there had been covert hints in some newspapers to the effect that, doubtless, an arrest would shortly be made—and that, naturally, the present crime wave could not be expected to recede if criminals were not brought to speedy justice. Possibly, these implied criticisms had piqued Haimes's professional pride.

" I'm expecting something, Mr. Arnold. And I'll tell you why, though it will mean plain speaking. If *you* think something very unusual, it probably is—because I've a feeling that there are many things which you would think normal enough, but other people would find them decidedly queer."

" I dare say you're right. Anyhow, it's for you to judge whether what I have to tell you is unusual, and whether it has any value. But I want to make it plain from the outset that the incident I've come to tell you about would never have happened except for Mervyn Maitland."

" How does he come into it ? "

" He's always had a hunch that the murderer would be found at the Mirage Club. That's why he's haunted the place, as you probably know. I assume you've kept one eye on that club."

" We didn't forget it."

" Well, Maitland insisted that I should go there, which I did very reluctantly, because I hate the damned place. I went there alone three times. No one at the club knew who I was. On my third visit, a few days ago, I ran into a man I know who shouted my name at the top of his voice, with the result that several people heard it. One of them—a man—turned up at my flat last night and said he wanted a long talk with me."

" Name ? "

" Hilary Harcourt. Incidentally, he seems very proud of his name. He asked twice if I did not think it very distinguished. He also said that you don't forget it."

" Was Maitland at the flat ? "

" No, he's away and won't be back till to-morrow."

" What did you make of Harcourt ? "

" I found him very eccentric—even by my standards."

I then gave a short summary of Harcourt's attitude on arrival and stressed the fact that although I found him extremely repellent, I instinctively felt that I must listen to what he had to say.

" Is he intelligent ? "

" The word isn't applicable. He has insight—and insight from a very disturbing angle."

" That's something, coming from you."

" Insight usually belongs to queer people. The normal only see what they expect. Harcourt, however, is in a special category."

Then I exclaimed irritably :

" Look here, Haimes ! I'm not going to describe Harcourt at length unless you tell me what *you* know about him. God knows I don't want to talk about him at all ! So I'm certainly not going to make this longer than it need be by telling you things which you already know."

" I know something, of course, about all the people who frequent the Mirage Club. Wait a minute ! "

He picked up the receiver, gave a number, then asked for some papers to be brought to him immediately.

When they arrived, he glanced at them, then said :

" Harcourt is a recent member of the club—he doesn't talk to the other members—and he's always writing in a notebook. That's all I know about him—plus the fact that he's extremely shabby."

" His clothes are grimy, but their quality is first-class."

" That's interesting. You use your eyes. Perhaps he's come down in the world."

" He says he's plenty of money. If that's a lie, it's a stupid one—as you'll see later. By the way, this may interest you : he hinted that I am the murderer."

There was a pause, then he said :

" Only hinted ? Didn't put up anything which he regarded as evidence ? "

"No—only hints. He's intuitive in his way. Things that would tell most people nothing tell Harcourt quite a lot. Anyhow, I dare say he's not the first to think that I may have murdered Carol. In fact, I know he isn't the first. But one thing is quite certain: the issue is between Harcourt and me. You must make what you can of that remark."

"Well, go on!"

"Harcourt first discussed the night of the murder. He says he was out that night—near Mitre Street. He also says that he loves fogs and has always loved them. He went on to say that, when you're in a fog, you're 'A thought in a stupendous shadowy brain—the last thought in a stupendous shadowy brain.'"

"He's a madman, then?"

"Or a Surrealist. It's for you to judge. He made several strange remarks and did several strange things. Anyhow, he says that, on the night of the murder, he was near the end of the alley—and that he heard someone."

"D'you believe him?"

"He knows something. No doubt about that. Here's two more facts which may interest you. Every now and again, after a silence, he would make a remark which could have had relevance only to his own thoughts. Also, more than once, he produced a notebook, then wrote in it as if he were alone."

"Anything else?"

"He thinks he's a genius, but that's very common nowadays. He made several penetrating remarks about me, but there's no point in quoting them. Don't imagine he's a fool, because, I assure you, he isn't."

"Perhaps he got his penetrating remarks about you from someone else."

"I don't think so. But here's something which will probably interest you. I asked him if he thought that Chelsea student had murdered Carol. That amused him very much, but eventually he said: 'That's the kind of luck a genius gets.'"

I took the cigarette which Haimes offered me, then went on:

"Now we get to the real reason for his visit. He produced a drawing of a half-dressed Carol, which I did two

or three years ago. He said it was much better than *Enigma*. Its only fault was that it was too lady-like. He wanted me to do a series of unlady-like drawings of Carol—for which he would pay a lot."

"Did he know Carol?"

"He says not."

"Where did he get that drawing?"

"That's a mystery. He says he bought it—at a price."

"What did you do with the drawing when you finished it?"

"Gave it to Carol."

"Of course you asked Harcourt how he got it?"

"Yes, and he suggested a number of ways by which he might have come by it. Said she might have sold it—or lost it—or had it stolen. Well, I can't say that she didn't lose it—or have it stolen—because either may have happened during the weeks before her death. As you know, I didn't see her during that period."

"When did Harcourt get the drawing?"

"He says only recently. Round about the time she was murdered. Here's another point. He didn't want me to show that drawing to any one. He was very definite about that."

"Did he tell you anything about himself?"

"Not a lot. He said he had come to London only recently—and that he'd been away for years—a long way away."

After a silence, Haimes said :

"You must know, Arnold, whether you believe what this fellow said, or whether you don't."

"I don't think he lied consciously."

"Well, let's get back to the drawing. Do you think Carol sold it?"

"I'm certain she didn't."

"Why are you so certain?"

"Because she was very attached to it. She was delighted when I gave it to her—and pleased as a child when she found it fitted the celluloid case in which she kept her identity card. She said she'd now really be able to prove who she was."

Haimes rose, crossed to the window, then, having surveyed the frost-bound scene, turned and said :

"Tell me your most definite impressions about Harcourt."

"I believe he was physically exhausted. I'm certain he has a superman conception of himself. Incidentally, he told me he was the greatest psychologist there has ever been. I believe that on several occasions he entirely forgot my presence—especially when he was writing in his notebook."

"You said he made some remarks which could relate only to his own thoughts. D'you remember any of them?"

"He said once, apropos of nothing : 'Good enough for a text-book psychologist, I've no doubt.' Another time he said : 'Not there ! Is it likely ?' But, apart from these monologues, he made some strange remarks. For instance, he told me that he 'could hear a ghost—walking on tip-toe.' And I've just remembered that he said that 'One is always hearing voices—all sorts of voices—day and night.'"

"He said that?"

"Yes."

After a silence, he asked :

"Did you press Harcourt as to whether he had met Carol or not?"

"I did, but he only repeated that he had come to London recently and that he did not join the club until Carol was dead. When I said he must like the club a lot as he was always there, he made some remark to the effect that you had to be somewhere."

"He didn't convince you, then, that he had not met Carol?"

"I haven't a guess whether he knew her or not. But he knows something. I haven't a shadow of doubt about that. No idea what it is, but—he knows something. What I'd like to discover is how he got that drawing of Carol. That's the mystery. I'm certain she did not sell it, and I'd be very surprised if she lost it."

"Because she was so attached to it?"

"Yes. Heaven knows why, but she was."

"And she always kept it in the case with her identity card?"

"Yes. And she always carried the case in her bag."

"You're—certain?"

"Quite certain."

Then I exclaimed :

" Damn it, Haimes ! *You* must know if that case was in Carol's room ! "

" Yes, it was there."

" In her bag ? "

" Yes."

" Evidently the drawing wasn't."

" No—no drawing."

Before I could speak, he went on :

" How did you leave things with Harcourt ? "

" I felt I'd better placate him, so I agreed to do the drawings he wanted—but told him I needed the drawing he had of Carol."

" Why did you say that ? "

" Because it made me feel sick to see it in his hand."

" Did he give it to you ? "

" Yes, after a lot of fuss. At one moment, he was afraid that I'd tear it up. Then he thought perhaps I'd better have it. Then he got into a panic because he was afraid I'd show it to people. I had to promise that I wouldn't let any one see it—or tell any one that we had met."

" Well, go on ! "

" He made such a fuss about my not showing it to any one that I suggested he should put the drawing into an envelope. He thought that was a grand idea, so he put it in an envelope, then took such elaborate precautions to ensure that the flap was fast that I told him he could seal it if he liked. He thought that was an inspiration. He put a great blob of wax on the back of the envelope, then pressed it to make certain it held. It was quite a performance."

" And then, what ? "

" I told him to put the envelope in this book. As you see, I've brought it with me. You'll find the envelope in it."

" That's first rate ! "

He locked the book in a drawer.

" Now, Arnold, this is important. Have you told any one about your meeting with Harcourt ? "

" Not a soul. As I've said, Maitland is away and I haven't seen any one. You think it's better not to say anything about it ? "

" It's essential. Don't say a single word to any one."

I got up to go.

"Well, I'm off to see Antony Lawless. I gather you'd rather I did not tell even him."

"Much rather. Even the most trustworthy people sometimes talk in their sleep."

"That's true. And they sometimes walk in their sleep."

"Did that ever happen to you?"

"Frequently—till I was eight."

He came to the door with me.

"Thanks for telephoning at once and for coming round. Remember—not one word to anybody. You'll hear from me soon."

2

It is extraordinary how one can thread the streets of a great city and remain solitary—wholly intent on subjective things—yet avoid colliding with passers-by, and automatically take precautions before crossing the road.

I was in this abstracted state after leaving Haimes and it was not until I reached Piccadilly Circus that I became aware of surroundings—and became aware of them then only owing to a curious coincidence.

For some minutes before reaching the Circus, I had been thinking about Antony Lawless and the necessity for seeing him at once, so it was almost a shock when I looked up and saw him, twenty yards ahead, walking briskly towards St. James's Street.

It is, of course, a fact that the least detail about a person in whom one is profoundly interested possesses not only attraction but mystery. Inevitably, a person who wakens wonder seems strange. So, as I followed Antony down Piccadilly, I tried to imagine the mission from which he was returning, or the one to which he was hastening, only to discover that I had not a guess as to the probable nature of either. There is a dreary certainty about the range of most people's activities, but, with Antony, everything was speculative, because anything seemed possible.

I quickened my pace—came level with him--then took his arm.

"Max! . . . Where are you going?"

"I'm on my way to you."

"Good!"

"I've been walking behind you for some minutes, wondering where you'd been, or where you were going."

"I've been to see two men whom I visit every week. Like to hear about them?"

"Yes, tell me about them."

"One is a fellow who was in a concentration camp and, although he's been free for nearly two years, he still hides food—and hides it with extraordinary ingenuity. Which doesn't make things any easier for his wife."

"And the other?"

"He was invalided out of the army—a bad case of neurosis. If you were to visit him in his house, you'd think he was perfectly all right, but directly he goes more than a hundred yards from home, he becomes completely panic-stricken. That's been going on for over a year."

"What do you say to these fellows?"

"Just talk to them, about everything and anything—except the war. But, of course, it doesn't help when a V 2 explodes, as it did this morning."

Then, to my astonishment, I said :

"Do you see Mrs. Norton every week?"

"Twice a week as a rule. I ought to go to Hove this afternoon, although it's extremely awkward. But here we are!"

We went up the steep stairs, then into the sitting-room, where every object seemed to await the return of its rightful owner. Antony pushed an arm-chair nearer the fire, then said :

"What about some coffee, Max?"

"I can always drink coffee."

When he returned with a small tray, I was still standing, gazing at the fire.

"I haven't come to give you the sequel to my confession, but I have something to tell you—something which you'll find difficult to believe, and I don't blame you. Anyhow, I could tell only you."

I took the coffee he handed to me, then we both sat near the fire. After a silence, I went on :

"A man said to me yesterday that it's damned difficult not to hate the woman who knows all the little things about you—all the little undignified things which no one else suspects."

"Odd remark, don't you think?"

"The man who said it is pretty odd—but it happens to be true. At least, it's true about me. I loathed my relations with Carol because they made my pride wince. That's why I wanted to break with her. And I did try to break with her—more than once. And I tried like hell just before she died."

"Is that why you didn't telephone her when you were ill—those weeks before she died?"

"Yes, that's why."

"Incidentally, you didn't telephone me."

"One is always alone in a crisis. At least, I am. In the strangest way imaginable, others cease to exist. Anyhow, I'm telling you now that I tried to break with her just before her death, partly because it explains why I didn't go to Mitre Street when I got her letter."

Then, after a pause :

"I told you once that I was going to find out everything about Carol and—the last time I was here—I told you I had found out plenty to go on with. Since then, I've discovered something—something which obliterates everything else."

He said nothing, but I felt his attention tauten.

"I shan't be able to make this clear, because it's complicated. I can't make it straightforward. There will be some tangents. And here's one to begin with :

"All my life I've been haunted by a possibility—a return to innocence. Not the fragile innocence of childhood which, inevitably, is shattered to fragments, but an innocence which stems from experience."

After a pause, I went on :

"The supreme crisis of childhood is the event which ends it—the loss of innocence. You discover the essential nature of childhood only when it is over : you enter the jungle of experience only when innocence is lost. Most of us perish, inch by inch, in that jungle. But I sometimes dream that one's life should be a *détour* from innocence lost to innocence regained—through ordeal by experience."

Then I added :

"It's impossible to explain, because you only feel the deepest things—you can't formulate them."

"All the same I know what you mean. After all, a full

development seems to be, first, a lyrical innocence—then a descent into disillusionment—then a return to innocence, but an innocence derived, not from ignorance, but from wisdom."

"Well, that's the possibility which has haunted me. It's why I loathe every kind of servitude. It's why I tried to break with Carol—and you've no idea how I did try. I tell you, again, it is difficult not to hate the woman who knows all one's weakness. It's damned difficult! It's—impossible! Carol knew a Max Arnold whose existence no one else suspected. That's why I wanted her to die."

"You did want her to die?"

"Yes. I thought I'd be free then—and only then."

I rose and began to pace the room.

"But, as I've probably told you, her death increased my dependence on her. When she was alive, I had periods of relative freedom. I've had none since she died. I'm obsessed by her. If Mervyn hadn't turned up, I doubt if I'd have stayed sane. I'm completely obsessed by her! Her presence is more real now than it ever was when she was alive. You'll have to make what you can of that remark."

"Go on!"

"Her presence is *so* real that I sometimes think that her spirit is 'balancing' mine. I have a sense of equilibrium, which is a very new sensation for me. I feel that her spirit is compelling me to recognise everything I ignored when we were together."

"What sort of things?"

"Well, apart from remembering countless trivialities which I'd have sworn I'd forgotten—and which don't seem trivial in retrospect—I've had to recognise that I lied to myself about her when she was alive. I used to think my need for her was only sexual. It wasn't. Then I keep remembering things she did for me—little human things—like mending a pair of socks, or washing out a shirt, when the damned laundry didn't come."

Then :

"Above all, I miss her when a mood of total depression seizes me as I wander through hideous mean dismal streets—when everything which defies monstrous monotony seems a lie—when the paralysis of inertia becomes petrifying—*then* I realise that Carol is dead. I'll never see her again. I tell

you it's hell—naked hell ! I could never have got through these hallucinating weeks without Mervyn."

After a long silence, I said :

" I get the craziest ideas about her. Sometimes I think there's a similarity between her life and mine. For very different reasons, she—like me—was isolated when she was young. I've even thought there's a resemblance between my crude initiation into sex-knowledge—and her crude initiation into that knowledge. But don't take any of this too seriously. You're listening to a man who's been damned nearly demented for weeks."

" What you say is perfectly true."

" It—is ? "

" Perfectly true. You'd better come and sit down—and have some more coffee. It's still hot."

" All right. Thanks."

I went back to my chair, then lit a cigarette. At last I said :

" By way of light relief, I'll tell you one of Mervyn's theories. I've no doubt you know that he is romantic about Carol. What you won't know is that Mervyn has become a symbolist."

" What ? "

" A symbolist. Not only is he writing a symbolic novel about the Gararene swine, but he sees Carol as a symbolic figure."

" You're not serious ? "

" Perfectly serious."

" I've certainly thought that he's getting queerer every day, but I never expected to hear that he'd become a symbolist. By the way, can you imagine anything happening which would give Mervyn a sense of responsibility ? "

" No, nothing. And yet he can do a lot for people like himself. He could help a person when no one else could. Anyhow, he says Carol represented the emotions. So it's superb symbolism that she lived in a cul-de-sac—because the machine age has banished the emotions *to* a cul-de-sac. He also says it's first rate symbolism that the lonely visited her, because modern people, deadened by grey uniformity, do sometimes get nostalgic, and *visit* their emotions."

" I don't believe Mervyn said that."

" He did."

" You must be bringing him out, Max."

" Don't you believe it. It's easy to underrate Mervyn."

We smoked in silence for some minutes, then I threw my cigarette into the fire and said :

" The French say that the true is always the incredible. And the incredible fact is that I am in love with Carol. Although, God knows, I'm slow to use the word."

After a long silence, he said :

" Why are you slow to use the word ? "

" Because it was emptied of content long ago. And because nothing is so rare as love. The most nauseating humbug is the humbug which pretends that love is an everyday event. What utter rubbish ! Love transfigures. Well, go into any street and look round. That will tell you how much love there is in the world. Wherever there's ugliness, there's hatred. Look at the passers-by in any street. Do you see transfigured features—or faces that are half-finished epitaphs ? "

" When did you discover that you're in love with Carol ? "

" I've just discovered it—as a result of her death. The dead have terrible power."

Then I asked :

" Carol told you everything, didn't she ? "

" Yes."

" And only you ? "

" Yes."

" Are you surprised by what I've told you ? "

" I'm much more surprised by what you haven't told me."

" What's that mean ? "

He did not reply. He rose, collected the coffee-cups, then took them to the kitchen. It seemed to me that his manner had altered and I became more aware of this when he returned and stood with his back to me, looking down at the fire.

I waited for him to speak, but, when I was convinced that he intended to remain silent, I said :

" Here's another tangent. I told you there would be several. . . . Did Mrs. Norton tell you about my visit to her ? "

" Scarcely anything. She forgets everything directly it's over. Sometimes she has flash-backs, but very seldom now-

adays. And she doesn't recognise visitors. When I was there last, she had no idea who I was—and, when I told her my name, it didn't convey anything."

Then he added :

" I've just remembered that she wanted your address, soon after your visit. Probably just a whim. Why do you ask about her? Are you thinking of seeing her again? "

" No, I am *not*! There's nothing in the world that would get me to Hove again. I just wondered whether she had discussed me with you—as you go there twice a week."

" The only real point in my going is that it gives the woman she lives with a chance to get out. She's very frail nowadays. Almost unbelievably so. The doctor says she might die any day."

" Did you see her often when Carol was alive? "

" No, very seldom. She is the type who can only live in an ivory tower—and she was bombed out. She is a psychologically Displaced Person."

" That's not a bad definition of madness."

Again there was a long silence. He still had his back to me.

" Now perhaps you'll tell me what you meant when you said you were more surprised by what I haven't told you than you were by anything I've said."

" Can't you guess? "

" You mean—about Carol's death? "

" No, not about her death."

" Then—what? "

It was some moments before he replied unwillingly :

" Everything you said related only to your feelings for her. First, your feelings when she was alive : then your feelings after her death. You've evidently never given a thought to what *her* feelings were for *you*."

Before I could speak, he swung round and exclaimed :

" Think back! Think back—from your first meeting with Carol in Hartley Harrington's studio, till you got her letter on that Tuesday night! Then tell me what you imagine her feelings were for *you*."

" I've no idea."

" You've—no. idea! Perhaps you think her chief interest was the allowance you made her? "

" I'm damned certain it wasn't."

" Well, ask yourself some questions. Did she ever say she couldn't see you—when you telephoned ? Was she ever engaged, when you wanted to spend a Sunday at Mitre Street ? "

" No, never. I've thought about that recently—" "

" But, at the time ! What did you think *at the time* ? "

" You don't understand. I never really thought about Carol till after her death."

" Well, what do you think *now* ? Perhaps the truth is that—despite your discovery that you're in love with her—you still hate her. Hate her, because she knew you as no one else has ever known you, or ever will. I could understand that."

His intensity seemed to make everything quiver.

" Why are you asking all these questions, Antony ? You never used to ask any."

" What was the use of asking questions when you loathed your relations with her ? I knew where I was with you—then. You hated her—and that was that. But now—now—when you come here and tell me you're in love with her—I do ask questions. What do you expect ? And I want to know—and I've the right to know—what you imagine her feelings were for you."

" Rather contemptuous, I should think."

" Although she always did everything you wanted ? "

" There may be a simple explanation for that. Perhaps the allowance did have something to do with it. Carol had strange views about money. Harry Ambrose told me that she knew to a farthing what her father owed. Harry also told me that she wouldn't take a shilling from him till they became lovers. As she was so sensitive about money, it is possible that the allowance did have something to do with it."

" She was attractive, don't you think ? "

" Of course she was ! Why ask damned silly questions ? "

" She could probably have got as good an allowance from another man, don't you think ? "

" That's certain."

" Then ? "

" Look here, Antony ! What the hell's the idea of this cross-examination ? You say that Carol told you everything, so you must *know* what her feelings were for me."

"I know ! I've overwhelming reason for knowing ! I only ask questions to make you see the obvious."

"And what's that ? "

A long silence. Then he exclaimed explosively :

"She was in love with you—from the day she met you at Harrington's studio till the night of her death ! "

Before I could speak, he raced on.

"She made no demands. She knew you always came to her against your will. She sensed there was a reason why physical intimacy was repellent to you—and why, therefore, you hated her power over you. She knew all that. But Carol—loved. And that was sun, moon, and stars to her."

Then, in a tone vibrant with anger :

"No good staring at me ! You're hearing the truth—at last. You would never have heard it, if you had not told me that you're in love with her. She had a tremendous admiration for you as an artist before she met you. You cannot imagine what it meant to her that she sat for *Enigma*. The catastrophic change in her life, caused by her father's sudden death, was given meaning by the fact that, through it, she met you. You say that love is rare. That's perfectly true, it is. You say it transfigures. That's true too, it does. It transfigured Carol."

He began to stride up and down the room.

"You never seem to have asked yourself the most obvious questions. Why d'you imagine that all sorts of unhappy people were always going to her flat ? Because she radiated something which precious few people possess. That's why. She had no resentment, no pride, no hatred. She accepted everything that had happened to her—all the squalor, all the humiliations—accepted them gratefully because, through them, she met you."

"It sounds like a dream to me."

"Perhaps you'll discover how right the French are when they say that the true is always the incredible. You never imagined that you'd be in love with her. So, perhaps, you'll eventually find out how wholly she was in love with you."

"You said you had overwhelming reason for knowing what Carol's feelings were for me. What is that overwhelming reason ? "

There was a long silence before he said slowly :

"The fact that she wouldn't marry me."

I rose, then went to him.

"You asked Carol to *marry* you?"

"Yes."

"And you mean to tell me that she refused?"

"Yes."

"Because she was in love with me?"

"Yes. And now you know everything."

I went into the hall—got my hat and overcoat—then returned.

"I may know everything, but I realise none of it. I'm going. The next time we meet, we shall know who murdered her."

"How can you possibly know that?"

"It doesn't matter how. The next time I come here, we shall know who murdered her."

CHAPTER THREE

AN AFTERNOON WITH MERVYN

THE NEXT DAY, I returned to the flat at about four o'clock to find Mervyn in the sitting-room, arranging numerous newspapers on the table. He seemed larger and better dressed even than usual and had an alert confident air which was new and impressive.

He was delighted to see me. He announced that we would have a drink as he had managed to get a bottle of whisky owing to high-pressure barter, and that then he would give an account of remarkable adventures during his two days' absence.

He made me sit in the best chair—drew the curtains—switched on all the lights—then returned to the newspapers.

"Must glance at these, Max. Perhaps peace has been declared and we've missed it."

He ran an expert eye over a popular newspaper.

He threw the paper aside, picked up another and scanned the headlines.

"What a mess, Max! What a spectacle the era of Progress presents! In its way, a fascinating spectacle. Interesting to the head—annihilating to the heart . . .

Here's some fellow writing about the verdict of history. Would you believe it? Probably a future historian won't have any space to spare for the Second World war."

He picked up another paper, studied it for a couple of minutes, then threw it on to the floor.

"It's interesting that proprietors of popular newspapers evidently still believe in the infallibility of the dope. It's also interesting that our publicists apparently do not know that the English are the most instinctive people in the world who sense all the facts—although they are rarely told any of them."

He gathered the papers together, then crammed them into a waste-paper basket.

"Tell me something, Max. You've lived most of your life abroad, so you ought to have perspective. What will happen to England after the war?"

"A miracle. An economic Dunkirk."

"But why should a miracle happen to England?"

"Because England believes in miracles."

He paced up and down for a few moments, then announced :

"You're right. A miracle will happen. Incidentally, one has just happened to me."

Before I could speak, he went on :

"I've just had two extraordinary meetings—extraordinary, even by my standards. Very different, but very remarkable. Shall I tell you about them?"

"Nothing I'd like better."

"Before I start, you look different."

"I feel different."

He lit a cigarette, mixed another drink, then leaned against the mantelpiece, in the attitude of one about to be interviewed by the press.

"Now, this is important. I don't want you to think I've suddenly become an optimist. Most optimism is, of course, merely an evasion. It's a device to dodge suffering. Nevertheless, I must say that I take a less foggy view than I did of post-war economic prospects."

"How do you account for that?"

"I've been offered a job."

An impressive silence.

"I—Mervyn Maitland—have been offered a job."

"What sort of a job?"

"I'll tell you."

He moved an arm-chair nearer to mine, then sat down, leaned forward, and said :

"I ran into Buck Broadside this morning. Not a bad fellow. Bit flamboyant. Still, Buck's all right—if you like technicolour. He whisked me off to an ornate club—infested exclusively by Black Marketeers—led me to a corner table in a chromium bar, then ordered two double whiskies."

Pause.

"Buck says he's got a job for me directly the war ends. He also said that he was going to make a packet but there wasn't any time to lose because, after the war, we should get a Kerensky government and, after them, we should get the bloody Bolshies."

He half-emptied his glass, then went on :

"Buck announced that I had a unique knowledge of the difficulties of women—that I got on well with them—and those facts made me the ideal man for the job he had to offer. He added that he was speaking in absolute confidence—and I said I would not say a word to any one."

Pause.

"This is the set-up. Directly peace strikes stunned humanity, Buck is going to float a company—The Whistle-While-You-Work Vacuum Cleaner Limited. He said he'd swamp the home market with vacuums at a price which would annihilate competition."

Another pause.

"Then Buck became expansive. He was lyrical about the post-war export drive. His theme was that markets were limitless—and he certainly was. He said he was going to sell a vacuum to every member of the 'backward races.' I was distressed to learn that, according to Buck, the backward races comprise nearly three-quarters of humanity. He said the purchasing power of the backward races would have to be increased. He didn't say how—but no one ever does. Anyway, before I knew where I was, China, India, Africa were all luxuriating in whistling leisure. This vision of *Paradise Regained* so exhilarated Buck that he ordered two more doubles."

Mervyn finished his drink.

"I was pretty impressed by all this, but Buck now revealed cosmic horizons. He said that modern science would soon make inter-stellar trade possible. One had to face it and he, Buck, did face it. I tried to, but soon got dizzy. By now, however, Buck was doing a humming trade with the inhabitants of Mars and Venus—who, hitherto, had not been contaminated by contact with humanity. Buck wasn't certain whether Mars and Venus would be on the gold standard, or in the sterling area, or in the dollar pool. He thought the dollar pool was the most likely. With an escalator clause—of course."

Pause.

"But Mars and Venus weren't enough for Buck. There's nothing of the parish pump about him. Soon the whole of the Milky Way was resounding with the rhythmic hum of Whistle-While-You-Work vacuum cleaners. Nature will have to stop abhorring a vacuum when Buck really gets going."

Mervyn passed his hands through his hair, then went on :

"As Buck was now—literally—talking in astronomical figures, it seemed an appropriate background on which to mention the question of my salary. So I mentioned the question of my salary."

"With satisfactory results, I hope."

"I regret to inform you, Max, that Buck returned to earth with a celerity unknown to light. Also, he became smaller, physically. A fact which, doubtless, Einstein could explain—but one which I could only regard as a symbol. Buck then said that, as regards my salary, he had a purely nominal figure in view—but my commission would be generous. He repeated that my job would be to sell a vacuum to every housewife in the London area. He then added that he would rather I did not have affairs with customers—but he admitted that what I did in my own time had nothing whatever to do with The Whistle-While-You-Work Vacuum Cleaner Limited."

"So you don't think that Buck's vision of inter-stellar trade will come off?"

"Everything is possible, Max, except sanity. Buck's scheme leaves one thing out. Which is, that men will probably shortly blow the earth to smithereens. I shall be sorry if they do because, I understand, that might involve

the destruction of the moon. And the moon consoles Mervyn Maitland. I'll tell you something. One evening last week, I found myself in Seven Dials—a spot which owes more to the ingenuity of man than it does to the inspiration of the Creator. I was thinking how drab, dull, and dismal, everything was ; when, suddenly, the clouds relented and the ghostly glory of a full moon transfigured squalid streets. Mervyn Maitland bowed his head. Wonder stirred in his battered heart. He walked slowly on, in a mood of mystic reverence—then ran bang into Siegfried Bottomley who has the puerile delusion that I owe him ten pounds."

Mervyn sighed deeply.

After a silence, I asked whether it were still a fact that he had had no communication of any kind from his family. And whether it was still true that none of them knew where he was. He replied that those facts still stood—that he had won the Fight for Freedom—and that future acts of aggression on the home front would be ruthlessly suppressed.

"D'you mean to tell me, Mervyn, that your family don't even know that you're a member of the club ? "

"They know nothing. As I've said before, I would like to see Drina. Still, she'd find me if she wants me. She's only just over sixteen, but has initiative. She has many of her father's gifts. The simple fact is that I ought not to have married Ella. Purely my mother's doing. But I'm free, and am going to remain free."

He drew his chair nearer the fire, put his feet on the mantelpiece, then exclaimed :

"I say, Max ! Just remembered something. But, first, tell me if you've been to the Mirage Club lately."

"Not for some little time. And I'm not going again. Why ? "

"When I was there last, I noticed a seedy bloke, writing in a notebook. He kept looking at me in a peculiar way."

"How long ago ? "

"Four or five days."

"Did you speak to him ? "

"No. He's always there, but, for some reason, I've never taken much interest in him till my last visit. I wondered if you'd noticed him."

"He was there the night we talked to the Polish woman.

I thought I mentioned him to you. I haven't seen him at the club since."

" Odd-looking fellow. He studied me as if I were a new arrival at the Zoo. He'd gaze at me, then write like anything in that notebook. Still, heaven knows, you see some strange specimens at that club."

He rose, stretched, then lit a cigarette.

" And *now* ; Max, I'm going to tell you about the most extraordinary meeting I've ever had in the whole of my life."

" Sounds promising."

" *The* most extraordinary, without any exception whatever. Destiny makes my dates—and she certainly fixed up a strange one yesterday."

He turned, leaned against the mantelpiece, then went on :

" It happened like this. I ran into Antony Lawless at about half-past twelve yesterday. He said he had seen you. Incidentally, he didn't seem to be his usual serene self. But, possibly, that was because he had to go to Hove, although it was extremely inconvenient."

He broke off, then asked :

" Why are you looking at me like that ? "

" Go on ! "

" Well, we got talking—you know how it is—and then I made a shattering discovery. Antony told me he ought to go to Hove to see a woman who was mad and who would not live much longer. That interested me, so I asked who it was—and discovered it was *Carol's mother*. Then I remembered that I had seen references, in the early newspaper reports of the murder, to Mrs. Norton, but she soon went out of the news, so I forgot about her. *You* never mentioned Carol's mother—no one ever mentioned her—so I never gave a thought to Mrs. Norton. It was a devil of a shock, therefore, to discover that Carol's mother was out of her mind and living with a companion at Hove."

He paused, evidently expecting some comment, but as I made none, he went on :

" Antony said that he only went to Hove to give the companion a break—and he also said that, on recent visits, Mrs. Norton had not recognised him. So I suggested that I should go in his place. He thought about that quite a bit, then said it was a peculiar suggestion, but it really didn't

matter who went, as Mrs. Norton didn't recognise visitors. He *then* made the extraordinary remark that perhaps I could do more for her than he could. I've no idea what he meant, of course. Anyhow, he eventually said that he would telephone Hove, and tell the companion that a Mr. Mervyn Maitland would come in his place. Whereupon, I borrowed the fare from him—and a bit extra for a few flowers. So, having had one petrified bun and some icy tea at Victoria—during a lull in exploding V 2's—I caught a train to Hove soon after two."

Before he could continue, I exclaimed :

"Don't bother to describe her room ! It runs the length of the house. There's one of her husband's posters over the mantelpiece—photographs of Carol—dance programmes, and odds and ends, all over the place !"

"So *you've* been there !"

"Didn't she tell you I had ?"

"She forgets everything directly it's happened. You really *are* an incalculable being ! Why on earth didn't you tell me you had met Mrs. Norton ?"

"Because I wanted to forget it. That's why."

"Really ? Isn't that odd ? I found her familiar, in a peculiar kind of way. Still, perhaps there's a good reason for that. She's out of her mind. She's not dangerous, like the sane, but she is mad. And I am—well, not entirely normal, shall we say ? So it was a meeting between the end of the road and the half-way house."

He explained that, on arrival, he had a talk to Mrs. Norton's companion, whom he called Gertrude. He said she had grey hair, balanced features, and calm steadfast eyes—and that she also had the "concentration of one intent on a single objective." Mervyn was warned not to be surprised by anything Mrs. Norton said, because she frequently confused dreams with actual events.

"So, having been briefed, I went into her room. It's been altered since your visit. A curtain now cuts off the part by the window facing the back garden. This curtained recess is her bedroom. So, on entering, no one was visible. I was confronted by a curtain and silence."

Pause.

"Bit awkward ! Still, after a moment's hesitation, I parted the curtain and went in, so to speak. She was in bed,

motionless, and looked so frail that she might have been a spirit. When she became aware of my presence, she raised herself on wand-like arms, then pointed to a chair. I sat down, but said nothing because any customary greeting would have been quite incongruous."

After a silence, he said :

" She continued to study me with the most amazing eyes I have ever seen—eyes consumed by their own intensity. I admit I began to feel somewhat embarrassed. It was rather like being subjected to a third degree in the next world. I felt that nothing was hidden from her. Then—suddenly—I didn't mind. I liked this wraith-like woman, who no longer inhabited this earth. She suddenly seemed familiar."

I was too astonished to say anything, and eventually Mervyn continued.

" I suppose the third degree lasted about two minutes, then she announced that I was ' The fragments of something big.' "

" What did you say to that ? "

" I said the operative word was—fragments. Anyhow, she evidently did not regard it in the least extraordinary that I had turned up in her room. Not in the least ! Still, I thought I'd better give some explanation of my visit, so I mentioned Carol."

" Well—go on ! "

" She said : ' Who's Carol ? ' That did not help a lot. I told her that Carol was her daughter. Whereupon she replied that she hadn't a daughter. That was only too true in one way but I decided that, having gone so far, I'd have to go the whole distance—so I said she must remember Carol, who had been murdered a few weeks ago."

" What did she say ? "

" She said we'd all been murdered. And how true that is ! She was still leaning forward, devouring me with her eyes. It was quite clear that she regarded me as an apparition and, as I frequently feel like one, the situation was somewhat complex."

" Did she mention me ? "

" The only person she mentioned was Gertrude. She asked several times where Gertrude was. When I said she was out, she asked if I were *certain* she'd come back. I'm

convinced that, if I hadn't mentioned your name, she wouldn't have remembered your existence."

"What did you say?"

"It was some time before I left. She was lying down, staring at the ceiling. There had been a long silence. I told her I was living with Max Arnold, the artist."

"Well, what did she say?"

"She didn't say anything. She raised herself to an upright position—fixed me with a gimlet glance—then gave a slow, profound, and very prolonged wink."

"Did you tell her anything about me?"

"No. There was something so final about that wink that I was speechless. I waited, thinking she might discuss you. But, no—not a word. What she did do, was to ask if my wife was still alive. I said I couldn't go as far as that—but Ella certainly was still around."

Mervyn rubbed his hands vigorously, then said :

"When I'd been there about an hour, the corkscrew of hunger began to turn in my vitals—so I asked if she'd like some tea. She replied that we didn't want tea in the middle of the night. I admit the afternoon was gloomy and that lights were lit, nevertheless it was disturbing to discover that she thought it was midnight. Then I realised that, when I had gone, she would probably tell Gertrude that she'd a strange dream about a large man who wanted tea in the middle of the night."

Mervyn lit a cigarette, then sat down and put his feet on the mantelpiece. He smoked for some minutes in a meditative manner.

"Extraordinary thing is that I felt so at ease with her that I told her all sorts of things about myself. She seemed as interested as a child listening to a fairy story."

"What sort of things?"

"Oh, odds and ends that have been worrying me lately in a minor sort of way, don't you know? For example, I told her that I never really feel anything nowadays. I keep sticking pins in my soul without the slightest effect. Then I told her something which really does bother me occasionally. And that is that I cannot get angry. No matter what happens, I simply *cannot* get angry. Not even when bulldozer women flatten me as they rattle to the head of the bus queue."

Pause.

"She seemed to think that was excellent. She nodded approval—vigorously. Then I told her that everything which had happened to me before the war was so remote that it all seemed like a dissolving pageant—in which the least substantial figure was Mervyn Maitland."

"Did she say anything?"

"No. And I was wrong in thinking that she was giving me her attention, because she suddenly asked whether I had more friends in the other world than I had in this one. That took some answering, but, eventually, I said I thought it was about fifty-fifty."

"Why did she want to know?"

"She said that a tug-of-war goes on between one's friends in the other world and one's friends in this one. Your dead friends want you with them—and your living friends want to keep you here. So you are the prize in the tug-of-war. She then explained that, as your friends die, they join the rival team in the other world—and pull like anything to get you across the Great Divide. Eventually, of course, you are left almost alone in this world, so only one good heave is necessary by the other side's team and—over you go!"

"Did you find anything to say to that?"

"I told her that I owed money to so many people in this world that I was certain they would do everything they could to keep me here. While I'm alive, they still have hope of repayment. God knows why—but they have! But, if Mervyn Maitland were to enter the many-mansioned house of Eternity, no threat, no writ, no Income-Tax assessor would be able to disturb his celestial repose. Hope would flicker out in the hearts of the Maitland creditors. There would be weeping and gnashing of false teeth."

Pause.

"She seemed impressed. Possibly the economic advantages of death had not occurred to her. Then I told her something which really astounded her. And I'm not surprised, because it astounds me."

"What on earth was that?"

"I told her that I love life. And I do love life, Max. It may be absurd, but I can't help it. Despite all the horrors, all the humiliations—despite starchy foods, austerity, civil

servants, and Savings Weeks—I love life. Even in moments of spiritual black-out, something in me whispers : ' You're alive, Mervyn. You're *alive*. The sun shines for you ; the stars glitter for you ; for you, the moon sheds pale enchantment.' Yes, I love life, Max. Every day—new mysteries, new miracles. Everywhere—the unexpected, the incalculable. Here I am, perched with humanity for a brief stay on this little planet, hurtling through the void. Even when I get up in the night, so hungry that I go to the kitchen—hoping to find the fragment of cheese intact in the mouse-trap—I rejoice that the Almighty has given me life on a Lend-Lease basis."

Pause.

" That astounded her. In fact, I could see that she regarded me as a lunatic. This reversal of rôles was somewhat disturbing, nevertheless I gave her my views about survival after death."

I was incapable of comment, so he went on :

" I said I was not dismayed by the fact that many people do not believe in survival—because I was convinced that caterpillars do not believe in butterflies. I was about to continue, when she suddenly thanked me for coming. I didn't know what to say to that. It made me feel very peculiar. So I went on with my after-death theories and had just reached the height of metaphysical eloquence, when I saw that she was asleep. I rose quietly, then stood looking down at her. Now that the eyes were closed, the features had the finality of a death mask. Well, I thought I'd better go. And yet I felt that I couldn't just walk out. After all, I'd never see her again. So I leaned down and kissed her forehead. Why not ? She's one of my people. Then, raging with hunger, I went to the kitchen—where I found a muffled-up Gertrude who had just come in."

Pause.

" To my consternation, she said she had had tea. Then, mercifully, she added that she hoped I would have tea before I went. I regret to say that I wolfed everything in sight, including a Bath bun, which Beau Nash would have recognised. After this orgy, we went to Gertrude's sitting-room—a very precise shining-clean sitting-room. There was nothing on the mantelpiece—except a photograph of a girl. I indicated it, then looked enquiringly at her. She

nodded her head. Something in her manner made me think that, for Gertrude, the girl in the photograph was the reality—not the woman behind the curtain."

Pause.

" Well, as I waited for a bus to take me to the station, I began to wonder why, in the inscrutable mystery of things, I had had this meeting with Mrs. Norton. After all, everything is meaningless, or it isn't. And, if it isn't, then why had I come to Hove? Perhaps I should end up like that—minus Gertrude. At this point, however, a bus appeared. One passenger alighted—the conductor shouted : ' Full up ! '—leaving me on the pavement in a darkening world."

I think Mervyn was about to elaborate on the ethical standards of bus drivers, conductors, and queues—when the front-door bell rang.

" Heavens ! That's certain to be for me. I'm like the man who said he had no more privacy than a roller towel. You see who it is, Max. If it's a man with a club-foot and a cast in his left eye—tell him I'm in Scotland. If it's a woman with midnight blue hair—tell her I'm suffering from loss of memory."

CHAPTER FOUR

DOMESTIC CRISIS

MORE OR LESS prepared for anything, I opened the front door—to find myself confronted by a girl of about seventeen. A glance convinced me that she did not belong to the tribe of Mervyn's women friends ; but, as I knew we had not met before, I was puzzled by the fact that she seemed remotely familiar.

Although she wore drab war-time clothes, she invested them with individuality. Whether this was effected by an exceptionally attractive figure, or resulted from magical knowledge known only to initiates, I had not the least idea. She was neither pretty nor beautiful, but the expression of the rather irregular features had a unique appeal ; as humour, zest for life, and an indefinable moving quality were so intimately blended that none predominated. The

sharply defined arched eyebrows gave expectancy and naïveté to the face, but this impression was somewhat modified by a resolute chin.

We continued to study each other with frank curiosity, then, just as I had made a discovery, she asked :

“Are you Mr. Max Arnold?”

“I am. And you—are Drina.”

“Heavens! D’you think I’m like him?”

“Not physically, of course.”

“Well, in what way, then?”

“That’s not too easy to say, but there is a definite resemblance. Perhaps your auras are alike.”

She stood motionless, looking up at me with a spellbound expression as if I were a magician. There was no hint of embarrassment—no trace of self-consciousness—nothing, but total surrender to surprise.

“Bit frightening,” she said at last, “that you knew who I am. Of course, he may have described me to you, but his descriptions aren’t worth much, because he exaggerates so frightfully.”

The voice had a rich quality which made you listen almost as much to the sound as you did to the actual words.

“I do think it was awfully decent of you to take him in, particularly as you knew what he’s like. A lot of people take him in, thinking that he’s more or less a normal person. Then they discover that it’s not too easy to get him out.”

“How did you find out that he’s living here? He told me that none of his family knows where he is.”

“We don’t. I had an awful job finding him.”

“Better come in—and tell us all about it.”

“He is here, then?”

“He’s here all right. Been here for some little time.”

“Good! I was terrified that he’d have gone—or been thrown out.”

She hesitated, then added :

“You see, it’s important—awfully important.”

We went into the hall, then I said :

“I’ll go to my room, then you can talk to him alone.”

“Oh, no, please don’t do that! It will bore you, I’m afraid, but I would like you to hear it all. It’s not his fault, but he’s not much help. And—well—something’s *got* to be done this time.”

"All right. We'll talk it over."

"Thank you. It does seem odd that I'm with you. I read a lot about you in the papers just after the Chelsea murder, but never thought I'd meet you. And I certainly never dreamed that you'd take Mervyn in."

At this point, however, a voice was heard from the sitting-room :

"Who is it, Max?"

"It's Drina."

A second later Mervyn appeared in the doorway.

"Drina! Before any greetings or endearments are exchanged, tell me this: Is your mama with you?"

"Of course not!"

"Does she know I am living here?"

"No!"

"You're sure you weren't followed?"

"Don't be so absurd, Mervyn!"

He crossed to her, then took her in his arms.

"It's marvellous to see you! Simply marvellous! I've missed you. You're about the only person I do miss. But I knew you'd find me if you really wanted me."

"Well, I do—really—want you this time."

"So something's happened?"

"Yes."

"To one of the family?"

"To me."

"Well, you look all right."

"I am all right, but, all the same, something's happened."

"How on earth did you discover that I'm here?"

"That's quite a story."

For some moments, they gazed at each other. Mervyn's expression showed that he cared more for Drina than he did for any one else; while hers denoted affection and—
incredulity. Evidently, she found it difficult to believe that such a being as Mervyn really existed.

At last I said :

"Better go into the sitting-room, don't you think?"

Having had a good look at Major Black's furniture, Drina pointed to the huge sofa, then asked :

"Do you spend a lot of time, Mervyn, lying flat on that?"

"*That*," Mervyn replied with heavy dignity, "is my bed."

"Heavens! You would take the best room! Did you find the sofa here, or did you bring it?"

"I attracted that sofa to me by certain occult methods, which I am not allowed to disclose to the uninitiated."

He placed an arm-chair for her near the fire, then leaned against the mantelpiece and regarded Drina with proprietorial satisfaction. I sat, watching them, feeling as if the curtain had just risen on a promising scene in a play.

"You really might turn up at home sometimes, Mervyn. I haven't been living there for about three months, but I do show the flag occasionally. There's a mountain of letters waiting for you, and every one of them is marked 'Urgent.' And there's a swaying pile of reply-paid telegrams."

"It's pleasant to know one is not forgotten. Now, tell me something. No need for elaborate details. All I want is a direct answer to a direct question. And this is it: Is your mama her normal self?"

"Yes—only more so. Never has a second, day or night. She's on hundreds of committees. People turn up at all hours. No time for meals. Her Savings Group was mentioned on the radio. She says the Russians will invade England—and she's unearthed a Red fifth column, which meets every Friday in a basement. *Your* mother telephones every other day, and they have huge conversations about you."

"How right the great Tolstoy was when he said that 'Home is Hell.' If one were to think for a century, one could add nothing to—or subtract nothing from—that devastating definition. Well, well! Let us pass to pleasanter topics. And now I want to know how you discovered that I am here."

"It's taken a week to find you. I knew you'd be near the West End, because you always seem to manage that. I know you are always hungry, so I went to cafés and milk bars and asked if they knew a huge man, very well dressed, who talked to everybody, and was always eating."

"They must have thought you were looking for Goering. However, go on!"

"Yesterday, I went to a sandwich bar near Piccadilly Circus. Tiny place—with a few stools at the counter. I

described you to a bald, red-faced man who was cutting sandwiches, then asked if he knew you. He said he did. He also said you owed him five shillings."

"As I've already remarked, it's pleasant to know one is not forgotten. Well?"

"Then a man on the stool next to mine, suddenly said : ' You mean a huge bloke—talks no end—mad-keen on food.' I said I did."

Mervyn sighed, then echoed :

"A huge bloke—talks no end—mad-keen on food. What meagre terms in which to describe an immortal spirit ! However, go on !"

"Then he burst out laughing and said I must be looking for Old Mervyn. I said I was—and that I was Old Mervyn's daughter. At that, he laughed so much that he nearly fell off his stool."

Pause.

"Well, by now, I had quite an audience. The red-faced man was listening—so was a rather jolly woman who serves the coffee—and a woman in dungarees, who said she'd often talked to you, and that you were a *one*."

"She's quite wrong there—unfortunately. But why did the lunatic next to you burst out laughing when you told him you were Old Mervyn's daughter ?"

"He said your trouble is that you have too many daughters. Then he looked me over with a somewhat bleary but expert eye and said that you did hand-pick 'em—and that he wished he had half your nerve."

Mervyn regarded his nails critically, then said slowly :

"This is an incongruous planet. I was probably saying my *prayers* while my daughter was discussing me with these denizens of the underworld. Still, there it is ! Everything will be revealed in its true perspective when the paper shortage is over and the Recording Angel sends his bulky manuscript to the printer."

"Well," Drina went on, "I had to convince the man next to me that I *was* your daughter—so I produced my identity card."

"My dear child, that really was decidedly bright of you ! I don't know which I admire more : the fact that you had it with you, or the initiative which prompted you to produce it."

"It's the only time it's ever been the slightest use. No ! I've just remembered ! It came in handy when there was a round-up by the police at the Corner House. They were looking for young girls who rob commandos. Anyhow, he studied my identity card till he was satisfied that I am your daughter. He then told me that you were living with Max Arnold, the artist, and gave me this address."

"What was he like ?"

"He said I was not to describe him, because I might have stolen the identity card and, anyway, you might not be best pleased at the arrival of one of the family. He paid for my coffee and sandwiches, then said : 'You tell Old Mervyn he can keep the fiver he owes me.' Then he went, rocking with laughter."

"It's difficult to retain a remnant of hope in humanity. But, in view of what he said about the fiver, you'd better give me a full description of him. Not now. Later will do. Evidently the man has occasional moments of decency. All the same, it is indicative of the general decay in standards that, although one pays rates and exorbitant income-tax, the authorities cannot protect one's virgin daughter from the unwelcome attentions of stray lunatics in sandwich bars."

He switched off some of the lights, made Drina move nearer the fire, then sat down and lit a cigarette.

"And now, Drina, there are one or two other things I want to know. And the first is : Where have you been living for the last three months ?"

"With Kitty Tremayne."

"Really ? Such a nice woman ! She put me up once for the night and lent me a pair of Alec's very super pyjamas, which, by the way, I believe I still have. Is Alec still with her ? Good ! I like Alec. Extraordinary thing that he should have two such revolting brothers. I don't know which depresses me more—Ernest, or the writhing Ezra. Ernest's mere presence reduces everything to its lowest common denominator. Still, I think Ezra is worse. He will parade his religious virtues—although, actually, he's about as Christian as a cobra."

There was a long silence.

Evidently the time had arrived when even Mervyn realised that Drina would not have made such determined efforts to find him simply in order to chatter about the

family and friends. I believe that he had purposely delayed discovering the real reason for her visit, because he recognised that he was impotent to deal with any practical problem which demanded immediate and decisive action. Mervyn had to remain at one remove from actuality—and he knew it.

“It’s rather a long story,” Drina said suddenly. “I haven’t told any of the family, because I couldn’t bear any fuss. But I must tell someone now.”

After a pause, she went on :

“ Sounds stupid, but I don’t know where to begin. Six months ago, I met an American officer—John Earl. He was only twenty. We fell in love—instantly. You don’t believe in things like that until they happen to you. We became engaged on my sixteenth birthday.”

Mervyn sighed deeply.

“ It really is frightening to discover what’s happening while one is waiting in queues, or trying to snatch a little sleep between the explosions of falling V 2s. Did you say he was twenty ? ”

“ Yes, and the only child. His mother is a widow. I wrote to her and said I was afraid she’d be very upset and would think it was just infatuation, but we really were very much in love. I asked her to believe that. Then I said that if this news made her very unhappy, we’d break off the engagement and wait till we had known each other longer. John made me send a photograph. And he wrote her a marvellous letter.”

Her lips began to tremble. She waited till she had complete emotional control, then said :

“ I can’t tell you what an amazing letter I had from her. I danced for joy. She said that, although John was only twenty, she trusted his judgment and had never had a second’s anxiety about him. Then she said he was all-the-world to her—and always had been—but she’d always known that she’d have to share him one day and, if that day had come—it had come.”

Again, she waited for some moments, but eventually said :

“ Then John went to Europe to fight. Whenever I got a letter from him, I cabled his mother to say that he was all right. I wrote too, of course. And she sent me things

—food—all sorts of things ! I can't tell you ! I didn't know there were people like her."

Then, after a pause :

"Three months ago, John got leave—and we became lovers. Then he had to go back. But he was certain he'd get through all right. He was *certain*."

She shot to her feet.

"I can't believe it ! Even now, I *can't* believe it. He was so young—so eager !"

She stood absolutely still for more than a minute, then sat down, but it was some time before she said :

"We had told his mother that we were lovers—and that we were going to be married on his next leave. And then—then—I had to cable that he had been killed in action."

She made a fluttering movement with her hands.

"I can't tell you what she wrote me. I'd break down, if I tried to. You see, when he—died—I made up my mind I wouldn't tell people what it meant to me. After all, it's happening to everyone—everywhere. So I tried to go on as I used to. That's why I fooled about when I first came here."

Almost immediately, she went on :

"At the end of her letter, she asked if I thought there would be a child. Later, I cabled saying there is going to be a child."

"That's ridiculous, Drina ! You're only a child yourself."

"There *is* going to be a child. That's why I'm here."

She rose, then wandered about the room.

"You mustn't mind if I get a bit muddled. I'm only seventeen, you know, and it's not been easy."

"I think you've done pretty well."

"So do I, Max. I told you she had initiative."

"For one thing," Drina went on, "I had to describe to his mother the kind of family I've got. And that isn't easy."

"Impossible, my dear child—quite impossible."

"I wanted to be fair, but I *had* to explain why I didn't tell mother what has happened, and that meant writing a whole letter describing mama. It was rather a long letter."

"It must have been ! Practically a book ! I hope you

explained that all Ella wants is to simmer blissfully in bubbling self-satisfaction."

"I didn't say that, exactly, but I did make it clear that she's so immersed in committees, A.R.P., Fire Fighting, Savings Weeks, and Red Plots, that she takes no interest whatever in the family. Then I explained that my father had been invalided out of the army, and has troubles enough of his own."

"And how true that is!"

"So, one way and another, I've had to write her some rather peculiar letters—and it tells you how marvellous she is that she's done everything—everything!—to help me. If there are many like her in America, the sooner I get there the better."

"Yes, yes! But now, my dear child, tell me how things stand between you now. I mean, what are you going to do?"

"She sent a long cable when she got my letter saying there is going to be a child. She asked if I had everything I wanted and that, when the time came, I must go to the best nursing home and have the best doctor. She also said that, directly it's possible, I must go to America. And she said we should both find John again in the child. Then she asked if I needed money."

"Ah!"

"I couldn't ask for money. I *couldn't*. After all, I have a family. I don't want her to think we're all mad people. She may have to know one day—but not yet. Heaven knows I've given her enough shocks already! But, on top of everything else, to write and say I want money, really would be a bit too much."

"Now, there, my dear Drina, *there*, I think you made your first mistake."

"I—couldn't!"

"Is she rich?"

"Yes, very rich."

Mervyn sighed deeply, but, as it was evident that his attitude disturbed Drina, I said quickly:

"I think you were right."

"You—do?"

"Perfectly right. You had a difficult enough situation to explain without having to ask for money."

"Well, you may both be right," Mervyn said slowly, "but I don't think you are. I'm afraid you're taking up rather a selfish attitude. It might have given her great satisfaction to send a considerable sum of money to the head of the Maitland family. It would also have helped England's war effort, by providing additional dollars to finance purchases in the States. That apart, however, I think it's wrong not to provide people with an opportunity to gratify their generous impulses. Very wrong! Still, you didn't see it that way—so there's no good talking now. It comes to this, Drina: How are you placed?"

"Well, Kitty Tremayne only has a one-room flat and she can't keep me any longer, because Alec has a job in London. He returns to-morrow. So I've got to go. I've got to go—and I've half a crown."

"Half a crown," Mervyn echoed, in a tone which implied that this sum might possibly represent financial loaves and fishes which could be mysteriously multiplied. "Well, in my day, I've often had less than half a crown."

"I've got to find somewhere to live to-morrow. But one thing's certain: I can't go home and tell mother what's happened."

"Of course not! That's unthinkable! Your mama is the last person to know."

Drina stopped near me, then said:

"You see, I can't have a lot of fuss—and there would be a lot of fuss—no end of fuss—if I told her what's happened. You've got to understand that mama parades on a highly moral background. And she's managed to keep it up, in spite of Mervyn. She tells everyone he's engaged in secret affairs."

"And how right she is!"

"But," Drina went on, "her highly moral background certainly would collapse if her seventeen-year-old daughter returns home to have an illegitimate baby."

"She might think so, but it wouldn't," Mervyn announced judicially. "Illegitimate babies receive a rapturous reception in the Island Home nowadays. The government dish them out plum purée directly they're born."

Drina returned to her chair, sat down, then looked at Mervyn. For some moments, father and daughter regarded

each other with expressions in which affection and bewilderment were almost ludicrously blended.

Mervyn stretched lazily, then advanced a series of solutions for the problem presented by Drina. His first was that an Appeal should be inserted in the Personal Column of *The Times*. He proposed that it should be worded in these terms :

Young woman, lady, about to have infant through no fault of her own, requires long-term loan. Repayment guaranteed by her ex-officer father. American papers, please copy.

He went on talking, but I ceased to listen. Mervyn's attitude was final proof that he could not face a problem of this kind—even when it concerned the person dearest to him. I had long suspected this, but now I knew it.

Something definite had to be done, however, for Drina was obviously depressed by Mervyn's total inability to be serious, so I interrupted him and said :

"I don't see that there's any problem. Drina can come here—and she can come to-morrow."

"Oh, that's marvellous of you ! It's impossible, of course, but—"

"Nothing simpler. You can have my room and—"

"No, no, Max ! She'll have the little room. I'll prepare it for her. You won't recognise it when I've finished. That decorative Mrs. Dalrymple keeps offering to lend me a bed and anything else I want. Her flat's so crammed with furniture that the mice have complained—more than once. I assure you that, in twenty-four hours, you won't recognise that little room."

A long discussion followed. It took some time to convince Drina that she would not be a "fearful nuisance" in the flat, but, eventually, it was arranged that she would come the next day.

Finally, I said to her :

"It's all perfectly clear : you will come to-morrow and Mervyn will have the room ready for you. And here you'll stay, till it's time for you to go to a nursing home. You don't have to bother any more. You've carried too much on your own for too long."

"Why do you do this for me ?"

"There are several reasons, and one day I may tell you some of them. Anyway, that's what's going to happen—and we're not going to argue any more about it."

"I can't believe it! I shall sleep to-night."

She rose hurriedly, picked up her coat, and was about to go, when Mervyn exclaimed :

"One moment!"

He took out his pocket-book, extracted a pound note, then said :

"You'd better take this. I cannot have my favourite daughter wandering about with only half a crown."

Drina took the note, kissed him, then I went to the front door with her.

Directly we were out of earshot, she said .

"You know, I'm awfully worried about one thing, and it's this : Mervyn must have had no end out of you already. You won't get a ha'penny back. You know that, don't you?"

"It doesn't matter. For the time being, I've more money than I need. Anyhow, it was essential for me to have Mervyn here. I can't explain—yet—but it's a fact. No one else could have done for me what he's done. I owe Mervyn more than he owes me."

Then I added :

"I admit it shook me a bit that he couldn't face up to your problem. But I've known him do things for some people which only he could have done. You don't know how to place Mervyn. By all ordinary standards, of course, he's no good—but I'm not particularly interested in ordinary standards. Anyhow, I come back to one fact, and that is : he's the only person who could have got me through the last few weeks."

"It's grand to hear you say that. I'm awfully fond of him—I always have been. He used to tell me all sorts of things, which would have made mama faint, even when I was a child. Perhaps I am a little like him. He says I have his social flair."

"There's no doubt about that."

"But you're the only person I've ever met who feels about him as I do. Fancy letting Mervyn go to the war ! Just criminal ! Anyhow, what I'm always telling them at home is that, if he weren't as he is, he'd be something worse. Something much worse."

"There's no doubt whatever about that. It's been a close call for Mervyn—and it still is. He lives on a hair-line. Only those will understand him who have been on a hair-line themselves."

We went down to the main entrance.

"I bet you, Drina, he'll do a marvellous job with that room. He'll give it all he's got—and all he can borrow. Anyway, you'll see for yourself at tea-time to-morrow."

When I returned to the sitting-room, I found Mervyn leaning against the mantelpiece, smoking a cigarette. He regarded me with an abstract philosophical expression for some moments, then said :

"I say, Max ! it must be an heroic spirit who is coming to this earth, via Drina. It will probably be born just as the war ends—and the peace-loving nations start squaring up to one another. Yes, an heroic spirit !"

Pause.

"I suppose this means I shall be a grandfather, doesn't it ?"

"That's certain."

He remained silent so long that I was wondering if a sense of responsibility had stirred in him—when he suddenly asked :

"Is there a government grant of any kind for grandfathers ?"

CHAPTER FIVE

AN ARREST

AT AN EARLY hour the next morning it became clear that Mervyn intended to implement his promise to transform the little room for Drina. By eight o'clock it was empty, its contents having been housed in Carshalton's flat, which had "enough spare space to open a roller skating-rink."

By eight-thirty the "decorative Mrs. Dalrymple"—to whom Mervyn described the Drina situation in minute detail—was flitting from our flat to hers, then back again, with a tape measure in one hand and a piece of paper in the other. When the room's possibilities had been fully

explored, an expert conversation ensued as to which pieces of Mrs. Dalrymple's furniture could be most effectively installed.

At nine o'clock I decided to go out to breakfast—and to stay out till Drina arrived.

It was still extremely cold. I bought a paper—saw that the Russian offensive continued unchecked—then went to a restaurant near Charing Cross and joined the breakfast queue.

Twenty minutes later I managed to get a seat at a table where a ginger-haired man had propped his newspaper against the tea-pot and was reading it while eating a dismal yellow substance which bore a ghostly and ghastly resemblance to scrambled eggs.

Despite these dual activities, this forceful-looking individual performed a duet of curses regarding the news in the paper and the food on his plate. I did not know whether this duet was intended for conversation, or whether it was a broadcast to humanity as a whole, but he resolved the problem by exclaiming :

“Don’t have the bloody scrambled eggs ! I thought nothing could be worse than the sausages ! I underrated the chef. And don’t imagine you’ll get a kipper because the menu says they’ve got ‘em ! You can’t expect fish—if you live on an island. Gets worse every day ! Any one’d think we’ve been liberated.”

I thanked him for his advice, then ordered rolls and coffee, which arrived with a promptitude that astounded him.

“Blimey ! You must be one of Rose’s boy friends ! I waited twenty minutes for this jaundiced cement. Here ! Don’t you take sugar ? ”

“No. You can have it.”

“Thank the Lord for that ! ”

He resumed his study of the paper, then exclaimed :

“Strewth ! Talk about an asylum ! Listen to this ! It’s reported that the Foreign Office have not listed Hitler as a war criminal. What is he, then ? Santa Claus ? ”

Pause.

“Lord ! There’s world war raging, and some silly bastard is running a jitterbug competition—and they put it on the front page ! You ever been to one of those things ?

Ever found yourself surrounded by a mob of jitterbuggers?"

I said I had not.

"God bless my soul—what's left of it!—I wish I was fifteen years younger."

"Why?"

"Because I'd get out—just as quick as I could. That's why! Europe is going to be a very good place after this war—to get out of."

A moment later, he exclaimed:

"I've got it! Couldn't think what they'd put in this margarine. It's machine oil."

He pushed his plate aside, then lit a cigarette.

"We've done it this time! You'll see! I was talking to a bloke here last night—educated feller—and he thinks we're for it, good and proper. He said that Science will soon be dictator. We'll all be ruled by a Formula—and that will be worse than a Fuehrer. After all, with a bit of luck, a bomb will blow off the back hair and the pants of a Fuehrer—but what the hell can you do to a bloody Formula?"

I did not know the answer to that, so I said nothing.

"Ah, well! It don't matter a lot to me. I'm alone in the world, thank God! I run my own business—or I used to. Now, it's run for me. All I do is fill in forms. Have to do 'em myself. I used to have a clerk—but he went mad."

He put his cigarette in an ash-tray, then said:

"You look as if you've knocked about a bit. What do you make of the whole set-up?"

"Not a lot. It's obvious that there's anarchic self-assertion everywhere. What do you expect? Most people believe that there's only this world—that you're not here long—so you'd better get all you can, as quickly as you can, by any and every means. Plenty of people always believed that—but when nearly everyone believes it, the game's up. You're back to Babel. Incidentally, Babel was an early example, if not an inspiring one, of big-scale planning."

"Ah, well! there it all is. One thing's certain—it would puzzle the devil to understand us English. In 1940, when we thought the Huns would invade any day, we felt fine. Everyone was matey—and so polite we didn't know ourselves. But now, when the Germans are on their way

out, we snap and snarl and bite each other in a proper free-for-all."

He gave a laugh which shook the building, then exclaimed :

" Blimey ! Was it different in 1940 ! I'll never forget getting into a train at Taunton. Got into a first, because the thirds were full. And there was a solitary lady—in tweeds. You know—straight from the Manor House. Surrounded by a barbed-wire entanglement of social superiority. Silence—long and loud. I read a paragraph in the *Mail* which said they'd ring the church bells when the Germans arrived. Then I threw the paper aside—looked out of the window—and listened for the church bells. And then I heard a voice—one of those voices which remind you of the Almighty—suddenly say : ' Would you care to look at *The Times* ? ' Blimey ! I nearly pulled the communication cord."

" Those months after Dunkirk were pretty good."

" Wish to God they'd come back ! "

He looked at his watch.

" Here ! This won't do ! Still, what's the hurry ? It all goes in Excess Profits. To think that I—who swore all my life that I'd never have a partner—should end up in partnership with the bloody government ! I'd hang myself—but you can't get any rope."

When he had gone, I asked the waitress for my bill, then said that the ginger-haired man didn't seem to like his breakfast.

" What, old George ? Oh, he's all right ! We don't take no notice of him. Always comes twice a day—regular as regular. Do any one a good turn, old George would."

I went into the street, then began to walk automatically as I had no destination in mind.

Nothing makes concentration more difficult than a sense of imminent change. And I knew that change *was* imminent. Soon, Carol's murderer would be known. This certainty so possessed me that every subject unrelated to it seemed unreal. Inevitably, therefore, I began to think about Hilary Harcourt—and soon discovered new and disturbing implications in almost everything he had said. So true was this, that the account I had given Haimes of Harcourt's midnight visit seemed totally inadequate.

Nevertheless, I recognised that most people would dismiss Harcourt as a madman and therefore discount everything he said. It is probable that many people would have hesitated before telling Haimes about Harcourt's visit, through fear of wasting the time of a busy man—and it is possible that I should not have gone to Haimes immediately, if he had not stressed the necessity for telling him anything in the least unusual. Even as things were, it would not be very surprising if I heard in a day or two that Haimes had made inquiries which satisfied him that Harcourt was a semi-lunatic, who had not known Carol, but had become obsessed by the Chelsea murder and imagined himself implicated in it.

Nevertheless, despite these probabilities and possibilities, I felt that Harcourt was too complex to be relegated to any commonplace category. Far too complex ! But what chiefly disturbed me was the fact that I loathed him as I had never loathed any one. You do not loathe a person with whom you have no liaison on any level.

Gradually, however, as I continued to walk towards the park, I realised that my last meeting with Antony had been just as remarkable, for very different reasons, as my encounter with Harcourt. Till now, Harcourt had almost obliterated everything else, with the result that the revolution in Antony's attitude had been obscured, but now it emerged in starkly defined outline.

Perhaps the most astonishing fact was that Antony had been wholly sympathetic until he learned that I loved Carol ; then, instantly, he became fiercely antagonistic. He had not intended to reveal that Carol had loved me—and he certainly had not intended to tell me that he had asked her to marry him. Anger had made him say everything he wanted to keep secret. I was convinced of this, although it had seemed that he was determined to make me realise the truth about Carol. Anger had dominated him from the moment he learned that I was in love with her.

In retrospect, I found it remarkably revealing that he had said :

“ Perhaps the truth is—despite your discovery that you're in love with her—you still hate her. Hate her, because she knew you as no one else has ever known you, or ever will. I could understand that.”

I also found it remarkably revealing that he had also said :

" You're hearing the truth—at last. You would never have heard it, if you had not told me that you're in love with her."

Why not? Why shouldn't he have told me that Carol had been in love with me? Why shouldn't he have said that he had asked her to marry him? The reasons he had given for silence might have had some substance when Carol was alive, but, after her death, they had none. Anyhow, one thing was certain : the dead Carol had revolutionised my relations with Antony. I had not been wrong when I told him that the dead have terrible power.

A shout distracted me. I looked up—and discovered that I had reached the frozen Serpentine.

For some minutes I gazed at the static scene—at a twig half-imprisoned in the ice—at a motionless gull—at the inert sky. Then, again, I felt that I was not alone, and this sense of her nearness created a feeling of fulfilment unknown since the days of Fredrika.

At last I looked at my watch. A quarter to twelve. As I did not want to return to the flat till tea-time, I had many hours to fill in. And that wasn't easy. If I went to the club, I should have to talk, and I didn't want to talk. If I did not go to the club, I should get nothing to eat in expensive surroundings. Eventually, I decided to go to Knightsbridge, get a midday paper, then make up my mind what to do.

It was exhilarating to walk quickly over the rock-hard ground, breathing frosty air which seemed almost tangible. It was strange to be the only moving object in a motionless world, where winter barenness revealed the structural design of every bush and every tree.

As I approached Knightsbridge Tube Station, I noticed a knot of people round a newspaper man and was wondering whether he would have sold out, when he suddenly shouted :

" Chelsea murder! Man arrested! Read all about it!"

I stopped and stared at him.

I couldn't understand why he didn't bring me a paper—why he didn't push aside the people between us and bring me a paper. What did this news mean to them? Why were they here?

When I had the paper in my hand, I couldn't unfold it. I dropped it. Someone picked it up for me. There was nothing on the front page. Then I found a line at the top of the Stop Press column, saying it was understood that a man had been arrested yesterday morning. And then, at the bottom of the column, I read :

CHELSEA MURDER ARREST

The man's name is Hilary Harcourt.

. . . The man's name is Hilary Harcourt. . . . The man's name is Hilary Harcourt. . . .

I walked away. Instinctively, I went into the tube station, then stood by the bookstall. Haimes ! Yes, of course ! I must see Haimes.

I found an empty telephone box—but the normally so-familiar technique of inserting tuppence, dialling the number, pressing button A, suddenly seemed an immensely complicated operation, designed solely to frustrate any attempt to speak to Haimes.

At last I got through and heard him say :

“ Hallo, Arnold ! Just telephoned your flat, but you were out. Plenty to tell you ! Could you lunch to-day ? Good ! Have to be rather late, I'm afraid. A quarter to two ? Fine ! Meet me outside the Dominion and I'll take you to a place where I'm known. Nothing special—but we can talk there.”

I went back to the street, then looked at my watch. Just after twelve.

A moment later I saw an empty taxi.

I hailed it, then gave the driver Antony's address.

I hesitated outside the door of his flat, partly because a newspaper protruded from the letter-box and this made me think that he might be away, but chiefly because a sudden sense of freedom almost overwhelmed me. Eventually, however, I pressed the bell and, after a considerable interval, Antony opened the door.

I do not know what he said on seeing me, or whether he said anything, because his whole attitude made it plain that I was as unwelcome as a bomb. And although, eventually, he did ask me to come in, he qualified the invitation with the remark that he had very little time and a great deal to do.

I noticed a couple of suitcases in the hall and, when we went into the sitting-room, I saw a half-filled trunk near the window.

"So you're going away?"

"Yes."

I waited, but, as he did not say where or for how long, I lit a cigarette and wondered whether he would ask me to sit down.

"I shall have to go on packing. I've a lot to arrange."

There was a long silence, but at last he said irritably :

"I thought you told me that, when we next met, we should know who murdered Carol."

"So you haven't seen the paper?"

"I haven't had time."

"She was murdered by Hilary Harcourt."

"Hilary Harcourt?"

"You don't know the name?"

"Never heard it in my life."

"Perhaps you'll recognise his description. He's about forty-five—wears very dingy clothes of good quality—sandy hair—deep-sunk eyes—puffy features. He seems physically exhausted, and seldom looks at you. Know any one who fits that description?"

"No one."

Then he added :

"You evidently know him well."

"We'll come to that in a minute. He says he did not know Carol. I thought he might be lying, but, as you have never heard his name and don't recognise a description of him, it looks as if he wasn't lying."

"How long have you known him?"

"I don't know him. He came to my flat—once."

"So you found Carol's murderer. I thought you might. All the same, it's ironical that you did. What made come to your flat?"

I explained the circumstances which had led to Harcourt's midnight visit, then said :

"When I was here last, I'd come straight from Haimes, but I said nothing about Harcourt, because Haimes insisted on silence."

He lit a cigarette, then said with studied deliberation :
"I think they've got the wrong man."

"What?"

"I think they've got the wrong man. In fact, I'm certain they have—unless Harcourt is a homicidal maniac who murders indiscriminately. And that's what you'd have to believe—if he did not know Carol. One thing's certain : if he *did* know her, I should have heard his name."

"They can't have got the wrong man!"

"Why not? And why are you so disturbed by that possibility?"

"If Harcourt didn't murder her, I did."

"Have you told Haimes that?"

"I told him that the issue is between Harcourt and me."

"What humbug! I suppose you know whether you murdered her or whether you didn't."

"I don't know."

"I haven't time to listen to nonsense."

"Perhaps you'll find time to listen to the truth."

Then I told him how—when I returned to my flat on the night of the murder—I hesitated before going to bed because I had the peculiar sensation that there was something which must be done immediately.

"Not very surprising—as you'd had that letter from Carol."

"I didn't read it. I only read the opening sentences. That may surprise you, but—"

"It doesn't surprise me. It's—unbelievable."

"Well, it's the fact. So my feeling that there was something which had to be done was not caused by Carol's letter."

I told him that I went to bed at about three o'clock—and then I told him the dream.

I ended by saying :

"That was the dream. And, when I woke, I could not believe that it *was* the dream. When details of the murder were given in the press, they coincided with those of my dream. I've told you that, till I was eight, I often walked

in my sleep. Well, in view of all the terrible evidence, d'you wonder I was forced to believe that I had walked in my sleep to Mitre Street—and murdered Carol? Wait! When I was a child, it was when I became obsessed by something that I walked in my sleep—obsessed by the Empty House, or by a puppy which I loved passionately. One night I walked in my sleep to the stables to pat him and, while I was doing it, I *dreamed* that I was going to the stables. Well, I was obsessed by *Carol*—obsessed by the idea of breaking with her—so was it surprising that I thought I had walked in my sleep to Mitre Street?"

"Especially as you wanted *Carol* to die."

"You don't forget much."

He began to pace the room. I was still standing, though I doubt if he was aware of it. He seemed chiefly concerned not to lose control. Several minutes passed before he said :

"I thought you knew more about yourself than any man I've ever met. I was wrong. You've been torturing yourself for weeks about something which should have been perfectly plain from the outset."

"I don't know what any of that means."

"That's unbelievable. But everything about you is unbelievable—with one exception. Surely you've good reason for knowing that you frequently feel what is happening to others when you are not with them. I reminded you recently of the time we stayed at Laleham together. Boyd was in a cottage down the lane. He was ill, but the doctor did not think he was in any danger. One night you came to my room and said you were certain Boyd was dead. In the morning, we heard he had died in his sleep. I tell you all this again because you seem to have forgotten it."

Almost immediately, he went on :

"And what about the Empty House? You knew nothing of the family which had once lived there—and yet you *imagined* one which was identical with the family which had actually lived in that house. And not only that. When you saw that house for the first time, you sensed tragedy. And there are other examples of how you know what is happening—or what has happened—to people when you are not with them."

He stopped near me, then asked :

"What really caused that dream? You'd had a letter

from Carol. The opening sentences told you that she wanted you to go to her flat. She'd never asked anything like that before and it irritated you, because you wanted to break with her. You wanted to break so much that you hoped she would die. And—because you're clairvoyant—you *felt* that something menaced her. That's why you knew there was something which must be done immediately."

"Well, go on!"

"That was your state when you went to sleep. Then—in your dream—you saw what was happening in her flat. You *saw* the murder. An element of confusion was introduced by the fact that your hatred of Carol made you identify yourself with the murderer. But surely, when you woke, you—of all men—should have realised what had actually happened."

"It all sounds very lucid and logical when it's put like that—although it entirely ignores the possibility that I had walked in my sleep to Mitre Street."

"All right!" he exclaimed irritably. "Then perhaps you'll tell me this: If you were afraid that the dream was not a dream, why didn't you tell someone about it? Why didn't you tell me?"

"That's an odd question—coming from you. There are about a dozen answers. Here's one of them. You are always alone in a vital crisis. That's the sign that it *is* a vital crisis. If you can talk about it, it's only a problem. Surely you—of all men—know that there's a time when one must be silent, and a time when one can speak."

"Why should I be particularly aware of that?"

"I've known you a good many years, but it was only when I was last here that you told me you had asked Carol to marry you."

He said nothing, so I went on:

"There was no logical reason why you shouldn't have told me long ago—and certainly none after her death. You didn't tell me—because you couldn't. And I didn't tell you about my dream—because I couldn't."

As he still remained silent, I added:

"You said just now that everything about me is unbelievable—with one exception. What's the exception?"

"You really mean that you don't know?"

"I shouldn't ask if I knew."

"The exception is that all you care about—all you've ever cared about and ever will—is your creative periods. Your Fredrika moments, as you call them. You say you're in love with Carol. You don't care one damn about Carol. What's worried you is that, since you painted *Enigma*, you've lost your vision. Now Carol is dead, you delude yourself that you're in love with her. That delusion stimulates you. It's a new sensation for you to be in love. It's an irritant to imagination. Your emotions are coming out of cold storage. At last! Soon, you'll be working again. And that's all you care about."

Before I could speak, he raced on :

"You *always* win! You have bad periods—terrible periods—but you emerge all right. You depend wholly on a certain emotional state. You know it, but, through perversity, when you're bored, you nearly destroy your emotions. Nearly—but never quite! Already you're beginning to look as you used to look. You're awake, astir, alive! You're beginning to see things as only you can see them. And you delude yourself that all this is because of Carol! If Carol walked into this room now, you'd soon discover that you hate her. It's easy to love the dead. *You're* the *Enigma*."

"That's what Harcourt said. Anyhow, if all you say is true, you've only described a miracle. And that doesn't explain it."

Then I added :

"What's so strange is that you *want* me to hate her. Directly I told you that I loved her, you became fiercely antagonistic. I find that—enigmatic."

He turned, then went on packing the nearly full trunk. It was useless to speak, or to stay longer.

I went into the hall, put on my overcoat, and was about to go, when he shouted :

"Harcourt may have killed her—but you destroyed her."

I went out, closing the door noiselessly.

off the Tottenham Court Road where the proprietor led us to a solitary table in a recess.

Directly we were seated, Haimes said :

“ You won’t expect much, will you ? ”

“ I gave that up some time ago. Anyhow, I’m too excited to eat.”

Having partaken of three diminutive courses, and having experienced the customary sensation of dismay, when each arrived, that you had not chosen something else, Haimes ordered coffee and we lit cigarettes.

“ Now, Arnold ! The story had better be in two parts. Otherwise, it will be out of focus. So let’s begin with the situation before the entry of Mr.—Harcourt.”

“ I’d like it that way, because there are things which puzzled me long before Harcourt turned up. All the same, there’s one thing I want to know now : Are you certain he’s the murderer ? ”

“ Certain ! ”

He pushed an ash-tray nearer me, then went on :

“ No need to go over the many difficulties of this case : the number of people who went to Carol’s flat—the fog on the night of the murder—because you know all that. The basic fact in the whole situation was this : I had only one clue—a fingerprint on Carol’s bag. Nothing else. And it wasn’t necessarily certain that the fingerprint was the murderer’s.”

Pause.

“ Well, we couldn’t take fingerprints of everyone who had known Carol—even assuming that we knew them all. But one fact was soon established : the fingerprint on her bag was *not* that of a known criminal.”

“ Must have seemed rather hopeless, didn’t it ? ”

“ It didn’t look too good. Anyhow, ordinary methods were out. So I decided to look for anything unusual—no matter how trivial. I discovered three unusual circumstances.”

“ Was I one of them ? ”

“ You were one of them. You knew the electric fire was on in Carol’s room, although that fact had not been mentioned in the press. Also, the second time you came to my office, you said that several statements you had made at our first meeting were untrue.”

Almost immediately, he went on :

“ Of course, it was possible that someone had told you about the electric fire, but I checked up and it did not seem probable.”

“ What was the second unusual circumstance ? ”

“ This was the second : There was something strange about the purchase of *Enigma* at a high price—for cash. Also, no one knew who had bought the picture. I know that the dealer who had sold it died soon after the sale, but, all the same, there was something peculiar about the whole transaction.”

Pause.

“ You can guess how I discovered that the picture had been bought for cash. *That* certainly was unusual. Phipps had not had a partner, so I could find out no more, but I knew I’d got something which would fit into the final pattern—if a final pattern were ever assembled.”

“ And the third unusual circumstance ? ”

“ This one will interest you. You knew that the electric fire was on, but you did not know that Carol’s bag was under a chair in the hall. What’s more, its contents were in the devil of a mess.”

“ That’s why you asked if Carol was a tidy person.”

“ It’s why I asked if Carol was an *exceptionally* tidy person. It was very interesting when you told me that you’d be surprised if you found anything of hers—say, a drawer—in a state of muddle.”

He lit another cigarette.

“ Now the fact that her bag was in a mess may seem a trifle, but the men who examined Carol’s flat were impressed by the extraordinary tidiness of everything—clothes, stockings, linen—everything ! Every single thing had its place, and every single thing was in its place. So it seemed peculiar that her bag was in a muddle. And had a fingerprint on it.”

“ That’s why you were interested when I told you that Carol kept that drawing in her bag.”

“ Very interested—especially as the drawing had gone, and you thought it unlikely that she’d sold it or lost it. But all this comes later.”

He broke off, then said :

“ Don’t know about you, but I’d like some more coffee.”

"I always like more coffee."

"That's because you've lived abroad so much."

"You certainly made inquiries. I shall get you to write my biography."

"Your friend—Harcourt—is the man for that."

When the coffee arrived, Haimes went on :

"Well, there I was—faced with three unusual circumstances. Then that Chelsea student committed suicide. It was possible he had killed Carol, but there wasn't a shred of evidence one way or the other. So he became a question mark. It was at this point that I got stuck."

He held out his left hand, then a finger shot upright as he said :

"Problem number one ! Mr. Max Arnold who was—shall we say—an *Enigma* ? "

"Yes, do say it ! I'm getting quite used to it."

Another finger shot upright.

"Problem number two ! An unknown man bought *Enigma* for cash. Number three ! Carol's bag, with a finger-print on it. Number four ! The Chelsea student. And that's all I'd got."

"And you were stuck."

"Good and proper ! That's how I was placed when you came to my office for the second time. I'm going to be quite frank. Everything about this case was odd, and *you* seemed odd, so I decided to find out whether you could help. That's why I told you confidentially that *Enigma* had been bought for cash. That's why I asked you if Carol was an exceptionally tidy person. And *that's* why I asked you to let me know at once if you discovered anything which seemed unusual."

"And then I turned up with the Harcourt news. But, I say again, you owe the arrest of Harcourt to Mervyn Maitland."

"Don't you believe it ! You didn't make one mistake in your handling of Mr.—Harcourt. And, in view of what I now know about that gentleman, he took some handling. You were very astute. And, I assure you, he is no mean adversary. As you loathed the sight of him, it's a miracle you didn't kick him out. If you had, we should not be having this talk at this table."

"Even if all that's true, the fact remains that I should

never have met Harcourt if it had not been for Maitland. Still, the point is that we've reached the second part of your story—the Harcourt part."

"Yes—and it demands a drink. I'll speak to Carlo. Sometimes he can produce something. I'll be back in a minute."

He returned almost immediately and announced :

"He's bringing some brandy. It's all he's got and it probably won't be much good, but it will have to do."

The brandy appeared and, directly we were alone, Haimes drew his chair nearer the table, lit a cigarette, then said :

"You're going to get some shocks, Arnold. And here's the first : Hilary Harcourt isn't Hilary Harcourt. He's Eric Eaves."

"*Eric Eaves?*"

"Yes. What do you know about him ?"

"Not much. Years ago, he pretended to be an artist. And Lawless told me that Eaves was the first man for whom Carol sat. Then he disappeared and she never saw him again."

"Did Lawless meet Eaves ?"

"No. All he knows about him came from Carol."

"It all fits in. Here's your second shock : Eaves bought *Enigma*."

"I don't believe it."

"That's nothing to what's coming. But, first, I'd better make one or two things clear."

He put his cigarette in an ash-tray—thought for a minute—then said :

"The fingerprint on Carol's bag was Eaves's. Apart from that all-important fact, everything I'm going to tell you comes from Eaves."

"Does he admit that he murdered her ?"

"Oh, yes ! He's quite casual about that. If you want the whole story, you'll have to read his notebooks. There are plenty of them. A colleague of mine, Duncan, has read them all—and he says he's never struck anything in the least like them. And Duncan's had plenty of experience."

Pause.

"Better give you a summary of Eaves's story. Interrupt whenever you want to. You won't be surprised to hear that he's a sex maniac, but that's only one aspect, and the least

interesting one. Eaves lived with Carol for about three weeks, then she threw him out. He was—literally—mad about her. All his life he's been subject to what he calls a 'certain mental state.' Actually, he's always been off his head, and ought to have been certified. But he's very rich—and he had an aunt who brought him up and who thought he was a genius."

"What happened when Carol threw him out?"

"He went crazy, but as he wasn't violent and had plenty of money, he went to an expensive mental home in the country."

"So that's what he meant when he told me that he'd been a long way away—for a long time."

"That's what he meant. He was in that home for some years. He would go and stay at his aunt's house for weeks at a time and she often visited him at the mental home—which he liked very much, because it was so orderly and because he met interesting people. Remember that the authorities at that home had no legal power over him. He hadn't been certified, and the doctor thought he was only weak-minded. I fancy they all regarded him as a rich eccentric who gave very little trouble."

"Go on!"

"Then two things happened: His aunt died and left him all her money; and he decided to murder Carol. The decision to murder her was a complex affair. Duncan says there's no end about it in the notebooks. Apparently Eaves believes that absolute possession of a woman is achieved only at the moment when you murder her. Pleasant theory! Anyhow, that's what he believes—and he wanted absolute possession of Carol."

"You say there's a lot about that in the notebooks?"

"No end, according to Duncan. One day, perhaps you'll read them yourself. The notebooks *start* with his decision to murder Carol. Anyway, Eaves told the people who ran the home that he was going to London for some weeks to attend to legal matters relating to his aunt's estate."

"How long ago was that?"

"Three or four months."

"And he came to London with the sole object of murdering Carol?"

"Yes. *He* calls it their 'honeymoon.' He chats about

the murder in the most casual way imaginable. Duncan says that the notebooks record every thought and emotion experienced by Eaves from the moment he decided to murder her. Also, you will be interested to hear, there's a devil of a lot about you."

"About me?"

"No end! But that comes later. When Eaves got to London, it didn't take long to find out that Carol was still at Mitre Street. Eaves did not join the Mirage Club till after her death—for the obvious reason that he did not want her to see him. He knew she loathed him, and was afraid of him. But he often went to a pub frequented by certain members of the club and picked up details of Carol's life from them."

"Where did Eaves live?"

"He owns several houses in Fulham. One was empty. God knows why it wasn't requisitioned, but it wasn't. He lived there alone—in the basement. And a hell of a state it was in, I can tell you!"

He leaned across the table, then exclaimed:

"Now, get this! It's the only thing that pleases me in my handling of this case. D'you remember I said that, on the day of the murder, Carol might have seen someone of whom she was afraid?"

"I remember it perfectly."

"I was right. She saw Eaves—in the street. I've only his word for that, but I'm certain it's true. Carol was frightened when she wrote that letter. She didn't say why, because she knew you didn't know anything about Eaves—and it would have seemed childish if she'd said she had seen a man in the street, whom she'd known a long time ago, and of whom she was afraid."

"Yes, that's it. . . . God! It's awful!"

"Eaves knew Carol had seen him—and that she was frightened. So he had to act quickly, or she might get a friend to live with her. But he had to wait for a fog! Apparently, fogs have almost a sexual attraction for Eaves. Anyhow, that night, there *was* a fog."

Pause.

"I bet he went up those stairs very quietly and——"

"Just a minute! Eaves couldn't have known that the doors would be ajar."

"It wouldn't have mattered if they hadn't been. Eaves had lived in that flat—and still had the keys. Probably Carol remembered that."

"Go on!"

"I've read his description of the murder. Not exactly pleasant reading! He says he made less noise on those stairs than a shadow. Up he went, wearing rubber gloves. This was the 'pinnacle point' of his life. He was about to achieve 'absolute possession.' She was asleep. He had intended to strangle her with his hands, but, when he saw the dagger, he changed his mind. Less risky—to use the dagger. Any one of a dozen people might use the dagger. That's how he worked it out."

Pause.

"He stayed in the room about half an hour after he'd killed her. He says he experienced 'marvellous mystical moments.' Then he decided to go and 'tell the fog about it.' He took off his gloves. Why not? The doors were ajar—he could open them with his foot—he wouldn't have to touch anything. He went into the hall, bumped into a chair, then saw Carol's bag. Without thinking, he picked it up, opened it carelessly—and out fell her identity card case. Then he discovered the drawing."

"Go on!"

"He says he stared at the drawing for several minutes. Then he ransacked the bag in the hope of finding another. And *then* he made the stupidest mistake imaginable. He went—and did not take the bag with him. His explanation is that he'd forgotten about the murder—and was thinking how he could find you."

Suddenly Haimes exclaimed :

"You'd better finish the brandy. You don't look too good."

"I don't feel too good."

"Let's call it off. I can tell you the rest another time."

"No, I'd rather hear it now. . . . Eaves knows, of course, that I'm responsible for his arrest?"

"He knows that all right."

"Then he can't be exactly enthusiastic about me."

"That's where you're wrong. He's *very* enthusiastic about you. There are pages and pages about you in the notebooks. Eaves thinks you're a genius—and he's certain

he's one—so he regards you as a younger brother. He told Duncan that, spiritually, you and he are handcuffed together. I don't know what the hell that means, but that's what he said. Anyhow, he keeps asking to see you."

"*What?*"

"Mad-keen on seeing you! But I don't think you'll want to see *him* when you've heard all I have to tell you."

After a silence, Haimes went on :

"According to Duncan, there is some remarkable stuff in those notebooks. A lot of what Eaves has written is sheer insanity, but a lot—isn't. So Duncan says, and he's not a bit of a fool. All the same, he read me one page which seemed quite mad—by my bourgeois standards."

"What was it about?"

"It was about—fogs! Eaves says humanity is lost in a Great Fog. Every day, the Great Fog gets thicker and thicker. No one knows where he is. No one can find the family to which he belongs. You hear a voice—the voice—you grope towards it—and find no one. Everyone is alone. Everyone is as lonely as God. . . . Well, you may make something of that, but it seems haywire to me."

After a silence, I asked :

"Will they hang him?"

"No. He'll be detained during His Majesty's pleasure—and will probably spend the rest of his life in a criminal lunatic asylum, writing more and more of those damned notebooks! Incidentally, he never seems to sleep. So you were right in thinking that he's physically exhausted."

He glanced at me, then said :

"Here's the finale, Arnold. And I'm afraid it's going to be a hell of a shock for you. I've told you that Eaves bought *Enigma*, but I haven't told you where it is. It's in the basement of his Fulham house. It's the only thing in a small, windowless, filthy room. But the point is—he's altered it."

"*Altered* it?"

"Yes. You wouldn't recognise it. It isn't a nude any longer. He's painted in stockings, and all sorts of fripperies."

"But—damn it!—it's impossible!"

"Eaves says you'll understand."

"That's pretty rich! Did he say why I'd understand?"

"He says he's done to the picture what you did to Carol."

"He may be mad, but he isn't a fool."

"Well, that's the whole story. And I've never run into a queerer one. And Duncan says he certainly never has and, as I've told you, he's not exactly innocent. He's met some pretty strange people, so, when he says he's never run into any one quite like Eaves, it means something. And, I say again, if Duncan thinks some of the stuff in those notebooks is remarkable, it probably is. My opinion about that wouldn't be worth a damn, because I'm a very matter-of-fact person—thank the Lord!"

He looked at his watch.

"I'll have to be going."

"There may be some things I'll want to ask you when I've thought all this over."

"Right! And here's a question for you: How did you know about that electric fire?"

"That's quite a story too. In fact, it's such a story that you'd better dine with me here one night next week."

"Good enough! Tuesday? Eight o'clock?"

"I'll be here."

CHAPTER SIX

FREEDOM

HAIMES'S ACCOUNT of the murder caused such a chaos of conflicting emotions that, on leaving him, I wandered down street after street, as unaware of surroundings as a punch-drunk boxer.

Eventually, however—like a theme emerging from many confused motifs—one thought became dominant. I was free. Torturing uncertainty had ended. The dream had been only a dream.

This intoxicating knowledge transfigured everything: mean streets were no longer mean, but mysterious; passers-by ceased to be drab anonymous figures and became fellow human beings; even the discordant roar of the traffic had a triumphant note.

I wandered on. . . .

Sometimes you discover the nature of your thoughts with the impact of a blow and I experienced this sensation when I discovered that I was thinking—not of Eric Eaves—but of sentences flung at me by Antony during our last meeting. Now that Carol's murderer was known, those sentences affected me more vitally than anything else. I cared nothing for the motive which had prompted him to utter them with such frenzied emphasis. Truth travels by unsuspected routes, and in strange company, so his motive could be discounted. A man does not necessarily lie because he speaks in anger.

Antony had said that I did not love Carol—that all I had ever cared about were my creative periods, my Fredrika moments—and that I deliberately deluded myself about loving Carol because this “love” was a stimulant ; a new sensation ; an irritant to imagination ; a device to rescue my emotions from “cold storage.” And, when I was leaving, he had shouted that Harcourt might have killed Carol, but it was I who had destroyed her.

If you are eager to believe that something is false, it is imperative to face the possibility that it may be true. Otherwise, eagerness triumphs—and a lie takes root. I had to be certain that Antony's indictment was *only* anger articulate. If it were true, I should be confronted by the first death which claims many artists, and by the far more terrible fact that I was a greater murderer than Eric Eaves.

As I wandered on through a network of streets, now lit by pallid sunshine, it seemed grotesque even to imagine that everything which had happened since Carol's death had been deliberately willed by me. How could I consciously have contrived the long series of discoveries which had culminated in a total reversal of my feelings for her ? Since her death, every aspect of our meetings had been mysteriously revealed in a different dimension. I had not willed this. I had watched it. How, then, had I deliberately deluded myself that I loved her ?

Antony had said that it is easy to love the dead. It is neither easy nor difficult to love either the dead or the living. Love happens—or it does not happen. You cannot evoke it—or evade it.

If I had “destroyed” Carol, it was remarkable that

Antony had said, at an earlier meeting, not only that she had loved me from the moment we met in Hartley Harrington's studio, but that this love was "sun, moon, and stars to her." He had also said : "The catastrophic change in her life caused by her father's sudden death was given meaning by the fact that, through it, she met you. You say that love is rare. That's perfectly true, it is. You say it transfigures. That's true too, it does. It transfigured Carol."

How, then, had I destroyed her ?

For some complex reason, directly Antony discovered that I loved Carol, jealousy dominated him and compelled him to reveal everything he had intended to hide. So long as I loathed my servitude to Carol and longed to break it, he could endure the knowledge that she loved me. It was secret knowledge. It would continue to be secret, because I was blind. And he wanted me to remain blind.

Of all the false catchwords which circulate daily, like counterfeit coins, none is more spurious than the one which glibly asserts that "love is blind." It is a total lie. Hatred is blind. Only love sees the reality behind the appearance—and only love, therefore, can create a transformation scene. I have discovered that. And the modern world will discover it—or perish.

A sudden roar of traffic warned me that I had reached a main thoroughfare. I looked round. I was near Regent's Park. The pale sunshine would last only a few minutes, then the short January day would be done.

I looked at my watch. Drina was due at the flat in about an hour. I went into the park, which was almost deserted. Ungainly ducks slipped on the ice while an excited dog barked furiously. A little girl in a red coat and white gaiters—looking like a figure in a fairy story—gazed at a toy boat, ice-bound near the bank. Wheeling gulls uttered their long-drawn melancholy cry.

I walked on.

If Carol's vicissitudes had been given meaning because, through them, she had met me—I now recognised that isolated events in my life had become linked because of her : childhood ; the Empty House ; that Whit Monday ; loneliness ; servitude ; the terror of the dream. And—Fredrika.

It seemed inevitable that, locked away together, were

drawings of a girl I had created—and photographs of a woman I had destroyed. For, in a sense unguessed by Antony, I had destroyed Carol. I had destroyed a Carol who would have reached full stature if I had not been blinded by pride.

But I knew now that I should not be alone. I should never be alone. I cared nothing how incredulous others would be, I *knew* that, since her death, Carol had been near me and would remain near me. And I knew too that the innocence of which I have often dreamed—not the fragile innocence of childhood, but innocence which stems from experience—need be a dream no longer.

“He is the most fortunate of men who can trace an unbroken connection between the end of his life and the beginning.”

I came to a standstill.

Ghostly sunshine had vanished. No one to be seen or heard. Already, night was annexing the dominion of day.

I stood motionless.

And then I prayed—as I had not prayed since I knelt in the porch of the Empty House. . . .

THE END

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